

ASCENDANCE OF A BOOKWORM

I'll do anything to
become a librarian!

Part 2 **Apprentice Shrine
Maiden Vol. 4**

Author: **Miya Kazuki**

Illustrator: **You Shiina**





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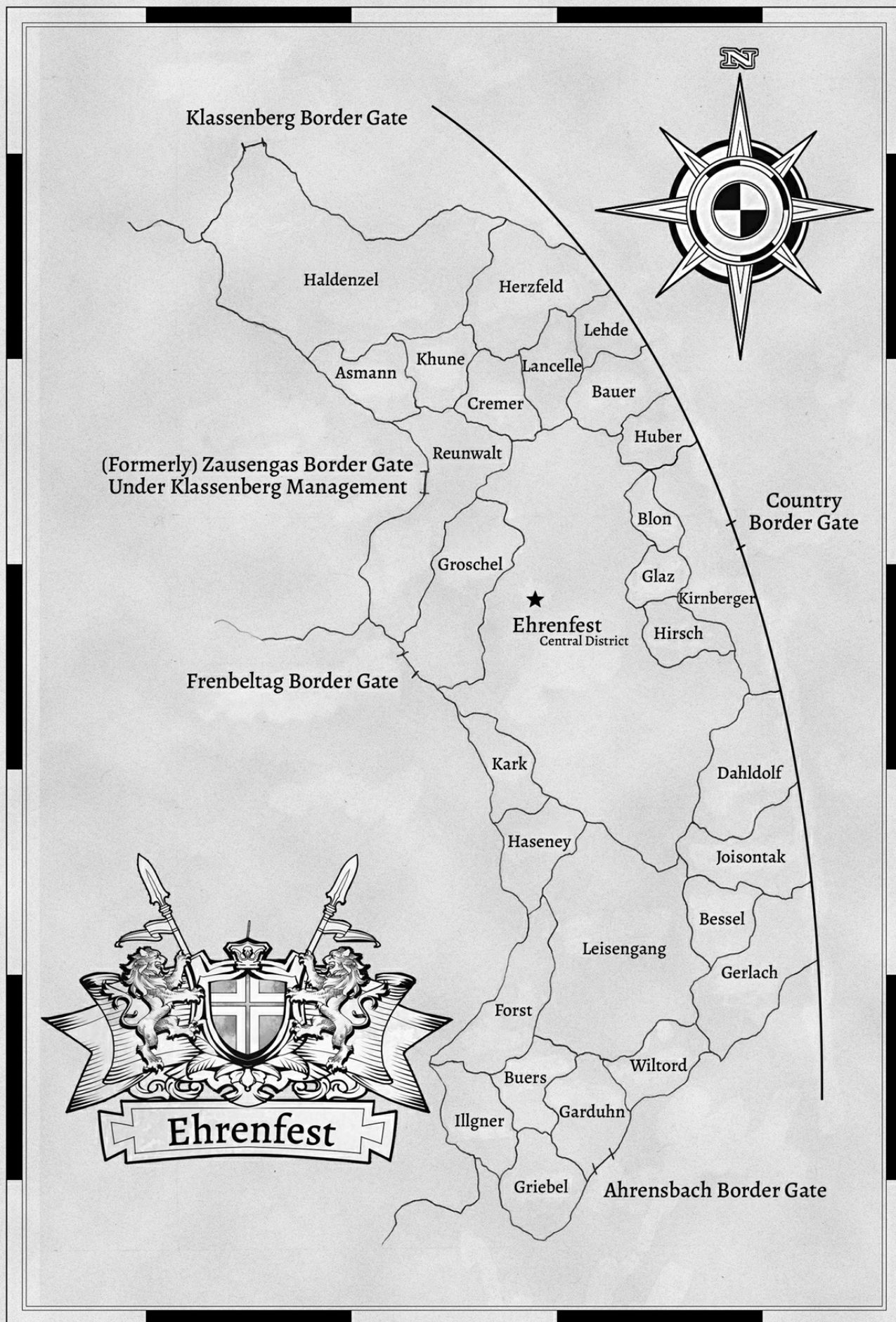
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Myne's Family



Myne

The protagonist, a daughter of a soldier who often collapses from fevers. She learned that her Devouring heat is mana and became an apprentice blue shrine maiden, a position normally restricted to nobles. She will do anything to read books.



Gunther

Myne's father, a captain at the south gate. He loves his family so much it makes everyone exasperated.



Effa

Myne's mother who works at a dye workshop. Always struggling to keep her loose-cannon husband and daughters under control.



Tuuli

Myne's older sister, an apprentice seamstress who is kind and takes care of others. According to Myne, she is "totally an angel."



Kamil

Myne's little brother. Was just born.

Cast of Characters

Summary of Part One:

A girl who adores books named Urano was reincarnated as Myne, a poor and sickly child. The world has a low literacy rate and paper is too expensive to buy, so she set out on a quest to make her own books, and eventually made her own plant paper. Upon coming of age, she discovered a room of books in the local temple. She immediately decided to become an apprentice shrine maiden, both to get her hands on the books and to use the magic tools there to survive her mysterious illness known as the Devouring.

Gilberta Company



Lutz

An apprentice at the store. Myne's friend, partner in crime, and her reliable health manager.



Benno

The chief of the Gilberta Company and Myne's business mentor and guardian.



Corinna

Benno's younger sister and the heir to the store. She's a talented seamstress with her own workshop.

Mark

A leherl (employee) at the store. Benno's skilled right-hand man.

Leon

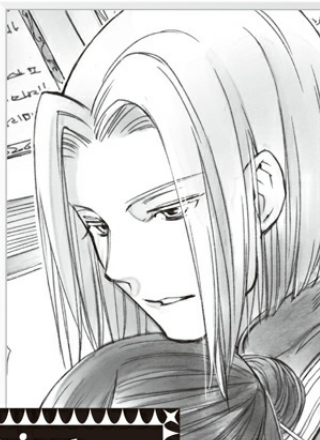
A leherl apprentice in the Gilberta Company. Is being taught proper etiquette and how to serve food by Fran.

The Temple



High Bishop

The highest authority in the temple. He hates the commoner Myne because she Crushed him with her mana.



High Priest

Myne's guardian in the temple. He values her talent in math and large amount of mana.

Fran

Myne's skilled head attendant. Used to serve the High Priest.

Gil

Used to be a problem child, but is now working hard running the Myne Workshop.

Delia

A spy sent by the High Bishop. Says "Geez!" a lot.

Wilma

A gray shrine maiden with a talent for art.

Rosina

A gray shrine maiden with a talent for music.

Dirk

An abandoned baby given to the orphanage.

Karstedt...Captain of Ehrenfest's Knight's Order. Count BindewaldAn archnoble from Ahrensbach.

Damuel.....A knight that guards Myne in the temple. **Heidi**.....The successor of an ink workshop.

Sylvester...The blue priest that accompanied Myne during Spring Prayer. **Josef**.....A leherl in an ink workshop and Heidi's husband.

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Prologue

It was the beginning of spring, right after the end of Spring Prayer. Young plants were growing greener by the day, their former pallor already long forgotten. The morning was bright, but it started to rain a little after noon; no doubt it was the rain of blessings. The farmers thanked Flutrane the Goddess of Water for watering their fields and, after finishing lunch, dedicated themselves to their indoor handiwork.

An elegantly carved carriage was rolling down a road between the fields, which were now clear of farmers. There was an ornate family crest engraved into a metal plate on the door, signaling the high status of the rider. But unfortunately, the poorly timed rain had muddied the roads and slowed the carriage's progress, and it was hard for a certain someone to hide their frustration at how much slower they were going than they would be on the stone roads of the city.

"...Flutrane is feeling unkind today, I see."

Why must you summon rain on the day I travel outside? Bezewanst bitterly asked Flutrane, all the while cursing the intense shaking of the carriage.

It was just before fifth bell when he arrived at Giebe Glaz's summer villa, which was located near the border to Ehrenfest's Central District.

"Welcome to my humble abode, Lord Bezewanst," Glaz greeted Bezewanst as he disembarked from his carriage, his fat belly swaying when he stepped down.

He was taken to the spacious parlor where there were already ten-some nobles gathered and chatting. There had been no other carriages in sight, though; it seemed he was the only visitor who had arrived by one. These other guests were true nobles who had traveled here using their own highbeasts, most likely because they wanted their meeting kept a secret from everyone, including their own servants.

Bezewanst could tell from Glaz's uncomfortable expression that he had been

ordered to host the gathering in his own mansion by Giebe Gerlach. It was fairly common for archnobles and mednobles to force the hosting of secret meetings onto laynobles.

Feeling nothing in particular about that, Bezewanst strolled over to the seat of honor and sat down as though it were the most normal thing in the world before welcoming the greetings of the gathered nobles. While that was going on, he could see Glaz talking to a noble he didn't recognize.

"Count Bindewald, seated there is Bezewanst, the High Bishop of Ehrenfest," said Glaz.

"Oh, the High Bishop, hm...?"

In truth, Bezewanst had been sent to the temple and so he wasn't actually a noble. Under normal circumstances, the nobles gathered at the mansion would never yield the seat of honor to a temple man, but both Bezewanst's mother and father had been candidates to become archduke. He had pure archduke blood flowing through him.

The only reason he had been sent to the temple was because the previous giebe, Leisegang, had commanded it. Bezewanst had somewhat low mana for his family and his mother had died right after giving birth to him. As a result, there was nobody to protect him when Leisegang, who was from the family of his father's now primary wife, demanded that his father put him in the temple—a demand which led to him having to take on the robes while still a baby. From birth he had been raised not as a noble, but as a priest.

However, his older sister of the same mother still treasured him as her only living blood relative, and the gathered nobles could not treat him lightly due to that; they knew well that his cooperation would be essential to advising and influencing his older sister.

"Lord Bezewanst, this is Count Bindewald from Ahrensbach. He will be instrumental in achieving our goals."

The fact he had been introduced as a count told Bezewanst that he was an archnoble with his own province. Bezewanst was fairly overweight himself, but even he couldn't help but notice that Bindewald was quite the sizable individual. His eyes were murky and he had the look of someone who would

commit heinous acts without a second thought.

Bezewanst, pretending not to notice that Bindewald was rather brazenly looking down at him despite him being the High Bishop, mustered the energy to give a composed nod. As he sat in the seat of honor, it was the guests who would be greeting him.

“I ask whether I may offer a blessing in appreciation of this serendipitous meeting, ordained by the pure rivers flowing from Flutrane the Goddess of Water.”

“You may.”

A faint green glow emitted from the ring nestled on Bindewald’s left middle finger. It was the kind of ring that all nobles had, the one that parents gave to their children after their baptism ceremony.

An indescribable frustration weighed on Bezewanst’s heart as he looked down at the ring. If not for the Leisegangs, he would never have been sent to the temple; he would have been given such a ring himself. The one he wore now had been given to him by his older sister when he came of age, but that ring did not change that he had not been baptized in the Noble’s Quarter, nor had he attended the Royal Academy.

Bezewanst knew there was a clear difference between him and Bindewald, and while that did frustrate him, it also gave him a dark pleasure to see such nobles kneeling before him—even if they were just looking to exploit his older sister’s authority.

“Count Bindewald is also the one who has been delivering the letters from Lady Georgine.”

According to the nobles in attendance, Bindewald had been a bridge of communication between Bezewanst and his niece, who had married into the duchy of Ahrensbach, south of Ehrenfest. Despite having been asked by his niece to fill several chalices with mana, Bezewanst had only ever met with the giebess of Ehrenfest who served as middlemen. He had never met any Ahrensbach nobles in person before now.

“I pray that Dregarnuhr the Goddess of Time has woven our threads of fate

tightly together.”

Even though none of them truly intended to offer prayers to the gods, their lunch began with a number of such blessings as finely mellowed whisky was brought out. As the amber-colored liquid was poured into each person’s cup, its sweet scent spread through the room.

Glaz took the first drink to demonstrate that the whisky had not been poisoned. Bezewanst, seeing that, brought his own heavy silver cup to his mouth. The thick liquid rolled over his tongue, making it sting a little. He moved his tongue around to enjoy the sensation, then eventually swallowed. He felt the burn of alcohol in his throat and let out a sigh of satisfaction. The whisky was of a very high quality; Glaz had no doubt strained his coffers to satisfy his guests’ palates.

“By the way, Lord Bezewanst. Where might the commoner shrine maiden I asked for be?” asked Gerlach, breaking the ice once he had waited for everyone to take a sip of their drinks.

Bezewanst took another sip of his whisky, feeling all eyes focus on him. They had asked him to bring the mana-wielding commoner so that they could purchase her, but she was nowhere to be seen.

“I have not brought her.”

“A-And why might that be?”

Bezewanst snorted at the nobles looking at him with wide, surprised eyes. “Why must I tolerate a carriage ride with a commoner such as her? I would not like to breathe the same air as her, and I am not about to prepare a separate carriage just for her.”

“I could have prepared a carriage myself, had you asked...”

The nobles bemoaned the missed opportunity, but it was difficult for Bezewanst to take Myne away without the High Priest noticing. He had considered using Delia to draw her out, but the sharp-eyed attendant who once served the High Priest never allowed the two of them to be alone. The plan would likely end in failure, serving no purpose but to put the High Priest more on guard.

...Why must I, of archduke blood, expose myself to danger for their sake in the first place? Bezewanst thought as he prepared to shift the blame onto Giebe Gerlach, having already planned out his excuses.

“They are much more on guard now due to the failed attempt during Spring Prayer. You should be thankful for the disaster I averted here.”

“...Ah, that is quite a shame. The plan was to use Devouring soldiers borrowed from Count Bindewald to attack her carriage, but alas.”

The plan to kidnap Myne during Spring Prayer had proven fruitless. Kidnapping an apprentice shrine maiden of commoner origin should have been trivial for magic-wielding nobles; the fact that they had failed was no doubt due to the High Priest, Ferdinand, accompanying her. He was also a noble who could wield magic.

“We can blame that meddling High Priest for this.”

“It truly is a shame. I had hoped to make that commoner girl suffer, inflicting as much pain onto her and Lord Ferdinand as possible,” spat Viscountess Dahldorf, overflowing with rage toward both Myne and Ferdinand. Her beloved son had been punished after being assigned to guard Myne during a trombe extermination mission in autumn.

Bezewanst had, at her request, complained to Ferdinand and asked his older sister to lessen Shikza’s punishment, but in all honesty, he didn’t really care what happened to him; Bezewanst had been frustrated by Shikza’s good luck in being able to leave the temple when the Sovereignty’s purges caused a political shift.

“Lord Ferdinand is a more formidable foe than we anticipated, it seems. We could have pinned the blame on the Leisegangs had we only been able to kidnap her while she was staying there...” murmured Gerlach, looking regretfully at Bezewanst.

Useless fool, Bezewanst spat on the inside. Had they successfully kidnapped Myne during the Spring Prayer, he would have freed himself of that irritating commoner girl without dirtying his own hands, all while pinning the blame on the High Priest. Bezewanst had been eagerly awaiting news of trouble occurring far from the temple, but in the end they had safely returned by carriage. It truly

was infuriating.

“We had even stirred the citizens near the border of our provinces to attack, but not a single one returned. They were all vaporized in the attack, despite the fact that half of them were Ehrenfest citizens,” Bindewald said, which made Viscount Seitzen—the giebe of the province bordering Garduhn’s—frown anxiously.

“That said, Viscount Garduhn has said nothing of the citizens that disappeared en masse. Perhaps he didn’t notice the attack due to its proximity to the border...?”

“That is quite strange indeed...”

Perhaps his attack had only harmed those from foreign duchies. Was that even possible? They wanted to know the details, but Viscount Garduhn was on friendly terms with the Leisegangs; he wasn’t currently present and hadn’t been informed of the Spring Prayer ambush. And as no survivors had returned, it was impossible to know what had happened there.

“Citizens were not the only ones who died. I lost half of my Devouring soldiers. Some of them were fine men capable of using magic tools and wielding mana on the level of a laynoble. They were for doing dirty business while keeping my hands clean. Their failure truly is a shame. I had been hoping to buy the apprentice shrine maiden to restock their numbers,” Bindewald said before giving a throaty laugh. It sounded horrible, like a burping frog. Bezewanst gave a slight grimace, a sign he would rather not sell Myne to him.

The nobles gathered around Bindewald looked at each other, then all tried to persuade him with fake smiles.

“Lord Bezewanst, I would greatly appreciate your help as High Bishop in acquiring a submission contract with the commoner shrine maiden. Your information and position would prove invaluable,” said one noble.

“We can imagine that the commoner upstart is unbearable for you to be around. This is a deal in which we all benefit. Am I wrong?” said another.

It was true that Myne was both unbearable and dangerous. Bezewanst would be relieved to see her gone, and would love to see the face Ferdinand, her

“guardian,” would make when she was taken. But Bezewanst was not one to put himself at risk. It would take an enormous amount of luck and strategic wit to avoid Ferdinand’s inevitable attempts to take revenge on him for signing the shrine maiden’s submission contract.

“We are dealing with a commoner here. She is not much different from the orphan gray robes. Do you disagree?” asked a noble.

“No, but she is not a gray apprentice. She has the mana befitting of one wearing blue robes. A normal commoner would not wield the power of Crushing.”

As someone who had been hit with Myne’s Crushing, Bezewanst knew that her mana was reasonably strong. He had admittedly let his guard down, but she did not have the sparse amount of mana one would expect from a commoner Devouring child her age. That was proven when she had performed the Dedication Ritual with Ferdinand—a ritual that could not be performed unless the two people involved had reasonably similar levels of mana.

“She is extremely rebellious, and I would not like to face her Crushing again. You all have magic tools to protect yourselves, but I have no means of resisting another’s Crushing. Why would I expose myself to such danger just to sell an apprentice shrine maiden?”

Bindewald, who had been stroking his pudgy chin while listening, took a round, cloth-wrapped something out of the pouch on his hip, then slowly unwrapped it with his plump fingers.

“This is...?”

“A Darkness feystone for absorbing mana. The Crushing of a mere commoner apprentice will mean nothing if you have this. Shall I offer this as a gift to celebrate our acquaintance?”

Bezewanst’s lips curved into a grin as he stared at the pitch-black feystone; no commoner child would be worth fearing with this in his possession. He could make her regret ever standing against one who had archduke blood.

Bindewald, seeing how closely Bezewanst was staring at the stone, gave a grin of his own as he held it out. “Shall we consider the deal done?” he asked, his

eyes gleaming beneath the murky haze. It was clear that he was confident that Bezewanst would agree to sell Myne to him.

Bezewanst found it irritating to dance upon the palms of others, but every day he found himself wishing he could sell that brat Myne to another duchy and send her parents—those wretched fools who had ignored his orders and fought back—plunging into the depths of despair. There was nothing he wanted more than the black feystone in Bindewald's hand.

Bezewanst changed his frame of mind; this wouldn't be him dancing on Bindewald's palm, this would be him working for the sake of his older sister. Ferdinand had announced that Myne would be under his custody in front of most of the Knight's Order. Knowing that she was stolen nonetheless would no doubt send daggers through the High Priest's heart, and nothing would please Bezewanst's sister more than witnessing Ferdinand's suffering. It would also help soothe the grieving heart of Viscountess Dahldolf.

...In fact, allying with Count Bindewald will please all of the nobles I have a deep connection with.

Having established a suitable reason to take the stone offered to him, there was no reason for him not to do so. Bezewanst grinned his own nasty smile while looking into Bindewald's murky eyes.

"I eagerly invite you to the temple whenever you are able. My older sister will take care of us no matter what happens."

Bezewanst agreeing to help sent a cheery stir through the gathered nobles. Some spoke of how excellent this development was, and although their enthusiasm was no doubt directed solely to the power of his older sister, he no longer gave it any mind.

"Ah, what the future might hold. I cannot wait to see," Bezewanst said while raising his cup. His eyes ran along the horizon and saw the rain intensifying over the city of Ehrenfest. But now, even poor weather was music to his ears.

Caring for Kamil

It was my first day as the older sister of my cute little brother Kamil. A day to remember for sure, but despite resolving to act like a proper older sister, my arch enemy—sleepiness—launched a surprise attack. Mom’s labor pains had begun at dawn, and Kamil had been born between second and third bell. By that time I was already thoroughly exhausted from pacing around the well. I got sleepy right after eating lunch.

...No, no! I can’t sleep!

I could bring water to Mom, do the dishes, and handle all sorts of other chores. At the very least I wanted to keep helping until Dad or Tuuli came back from the feast to help.

As I battled to keep my increasingly heavy eyelids from drooping, Mom patted the mattress beside her. “You can sleep if you want to, Myne.”

“I don’t. I need to stay awake until Dad or Tuuli gets back. I’m going to be an amazing older sister that takes care of Kamil all the time,” I replied.

I had no intention of sleeping now that Kamil was finally here. I had already held him once, and I intended to keep taking care of him.

Mom gave a gentle smile after hearing my determined announcement. “I appreciate the thought, but my main concern is you falling ill. You should rest if you’re tired,” she said.

I nodded sadly. Mom was still tired from giving birth; I couldn’t worry her any more than I already had.

I cleaned up the dishes, took off my shoes, and climbed into bed. After scooting to the side a bit so I wouldn’t roll onto Kamil, I rested on my side and watched his sleeping face before closing my eyes.

Your big sister will start working hard tomorrow, okay?

I didn’t last long after deciding to sleep; I felt Mom tuck me in and stroke my

head, and then I was gone before I knew it.

But partway through my nice sleep, I started to hear a high-pitched whining, like a cat meowing. It pulled me back awake. I frowned, not liking the feeling of being forced awake early.

Shut up... I wanna go back to sleep, I thought, pulling the blanket over my head. But that just made the crying louder.

...Gah! Why is there crying so close to me?! Oh, wait! Kamil!

My eyes shot open and I made immediate eye contact with Mom, who was hefting Kamil up and preparing to breastfeed. She smiled.

“You slept well, honey. It’s almost time for fifth bell to ring.”

Despite having been asleep for so long, I still felt like I hadn’t slept enough. I rubbed my eyes and looked at Kamil. My tiny little brother was giving his all to drink Mom’s milk. His sucking mouth, his unfocused, wandering eyes, and his teensy-weensy clenched fists were all super cute.

“I’m back. Is Kamil awake?”

“Hi, Tuuli. He’s drinking milk right now,” I said in the direction of the door as Tuuli, having returned from the celebration downstairs, poked her head through the door.

She walked over, sat on the side of the bed, and said “He really is tiny” while looking at Kamil.

“You and Myne were both this small too once,” Mom replied with a smile. I really didn’t know how to respond since I didn’t remember that.

Kamil moved his head away as if satisfied, and Mom patted his back gently. He let out a tiny burp.

“Not only were you slow and bad at drinking milk, Myne, it always dribbled out of the corner of your mouth. And when you finally got it down, you’d suddenly throw up out of nowhere,” Mom continued, her face crinkling up in a nostalgic smile as she looked at me.

She was basically saying that I was a handful from day one, so I pursed my lips in a pout. “I don’t know what you expect me to say about that. I was just a

baby.”

“Well,” began Tuuli, “you still eat really slowly, and when you eat too much you groan about your stomach hurting, so I think you’re basically the same way now.”

“Tuuli, that’s so mean!”

“Oh, but she’s right,” Mom chimed in.

If she was going there then I had something to say too. The bread we ate here was just way too hard. It was actually too hard to bite into normally, so I always had to soak it in my soup or drink first. Waiting for it to soften slowed me down whether I liked it or not, that’s all. I only ate slow because the bread was hard. It wasn’t my fault.

“How can you blame the bread when you’re the only one who eats slow, Myne? It takes you so long because you leave it in the soup ’til it goes all soggy.”

“Well, that’s ’cause it’s too hard to eat otherwise!”

It felt like I was even worse at chewing now that I had gotten used to the fluffy bread we had in the temple, but now that I was back at home, I fought each day to appreciate the unique experience of eating rock-hard bread.

As Tuuli and I kept up our back-and-forth, Mom waved us away with a wry smile. “I think I need to change Kamil’s diaper now, so...”

“Let me do it! I want to try!” Tuuli said with shining eyes before beginning her attempt to change his diaper. I watched closely, hoping to learn how it was done so I could help one day too, like a proper older sister.

She removed the cloth wrapped around him, wiped his butt clean using the clean part, and then wrapped a new cloth around him. Done.

Tuuli let out a satisfied “Finished!” and beamed a smile. She had done it without much issue, and it sure seemed pretty easy to do.

I’ll try to do it next time.

Tuuli speedily tossed the balled-up dirty cloth into a basket before looking out of the window at the blue sky. “So, Mom... Was that the last diaper we have for

Kamil? It's a little late in the day, but we'll get caught up in the rain if we don't wash them soon."

"Oh, you're right. We should hurry. Could you take care of what we have for me? I had Gunther put up some strings in the kitchen to dry diapers, but they're a little high up. You'll have to ask him to hang them."

As Mom and Tuuli moved things along, I peered out of the window myself, my head cocked to the side. There were some clouds out, but the sky was perfectly blue. I couldn't see any signs that the weather would be getting worse soon, other than the sun setting like always.

"...How can you both tell the weather's going to get worse?"

"How can you not, Myne? If we couldn't tell when the weather would be bad, it'd be too dangerous for us to go to the forest. Oh, but anyway, we need to hurry and get the laundry started! Let's go, Myne," Tuuli said while pulling me out the front door. It was at that point that it hit me—

"Sir Damuel told me not to go outside..."

I did kind of feel that I would be fine just going to the well, but I had been firmly told that going outside would bring danger to everyone around me. And considering the recent death of the head of the Ink Guild and me being attacked during Spring Prayer, going outside wasn't something I could take lightly.

Tuuli, having heard Damuel firmly tell me to stay inside until he came to get me, slumped her shoulders as she remembered. "We shouldn't disobey a noble, right? Well, I'll go do the laundry then. You can start dinner, Myne. Dad and I aren't that hungry since we ate a lot at the celebration, so just soup should be fine. Our neighbors gave us some spring veggies and sausage."

As I looked at the vegetables I was going to make soup with, I remembered that I had only eaten soup and bread for lunch. I put a hand on my stomach. "Well... I'm a little hungry, since I only had a little soup for lunch too. I haven't eaten any of the meat everyone from the temple gave us, and we need to get Mom fed well so she can make lots of healthy milk..."

In other words, I was asking to eat meat. Tuuli pointed to the storage room in response and said I could use the bird meat in there.

“Okay. I should just rub salt and herbs onto it, right?”

Tuuli shook her head. “Some herbs aren’t good for people who’ve just given birth. Just use the salt,” she said before heading downstairs with our laundry-filled tub and some soap.

I preferred herb-seasoned meat to plain salted meat, which was a shame, but if Mom couldn’t eat it there was no point in me making it.

“...If herbs are out of the question, I should at least use a little bit of Dad’s wine,” I said to myself after seeing Tuuli off at the door. I went back inside and headed to our winter storage room for the meat, and then went to fetch Dad’s wine from the kitchen shelf.

He would always desperately try to stop me whenever he saw me getting the wine to use for cooking. He said my food tasted more than good enough even without the wine, but I knew he just wanted to keep as much wine for himself as possible.

...I don’t care how much Dad hates it; I’m using this wine! There’s a huge difference between meat prepared with wine and meat that isn’t.

After massaging the meat with wine and salt for a bit, I started chopping the usual vegetables. There were still a lot of dangerous ones that I found hard to prepare, but naturally by this point even I could tell the difference between safe and dangerous vegetables.

“...Hm? Wait, am I worse at this because I’ve been in the temple so long?!” I exclaimed. My cutting rhythm was shaky and off since I had spent so many months living the life of an excessively pampered rich girl in the temple. My hand was shaking just from holding the knife.

“Aww, this sucks. I was at rock-bottom before when it came to doing chores, and now I’m below even that. I need to make a habit of doing chores every day,” I said, bemoaning my drop in skills while taking care not to cut my fingers along with the vegetables.

“Oh, this is vargel. Sautéing these with butter is better than putting them in soup.”

Vargel looked like white asparagus on the surface, but flavor-wise it was more

like baby corn. It tasted great and reminiscent of spring when boiled and cooked with butter, or just mixed with cream.

“I’m back!” Dad declared in a jovial, drunken mood, Tuuli following closely behind him. She had finished the laundry while I was cutting veggies.

“You go hang these, Dad. We’ll get supper ready,” said Tuuli as she handed the newly washed diapers to Dad and went to put the tub back in the storage room.

Dad spread out the diapers and hung them on the multiple strings stretched high in the air across the kitchen, close to the ceiling. I was a little bothered by the fact he was doing that while I was cooking, but I had to suck it up since Kamil needed dry diapers.

“If only it were sunny so we could hang them outside.”

“Yeah, the rain sucks. It really gets in the way when we’ve gotta dry these every day.”

Having a ton of diapers swaying all over the room was incredibly distracting. It just wasn’t a sight I was used to, and only when they were spread out like this did I appreciate how invaluable disposable diapers really were. Not to mention that these weren’t the white diapers I was used to from my Urano days—they were long strips of cloth made from sewn-together rags, and had gotten soft and thin due to repeated washings, which was about the only good thing about them. I wanted to push for us to use something more hygienic, but we were just using what we had. Besides, I already knew they’d say they didn’t want to waste new cloth on diapers that would end up getting just as filthy in no time at all.

“How far did you get, Myne?”

“I finished cutting all the vegetables I can cut. Looks like the season for vargels is almost over. They’re pretty hard now,” I said, showing Tuuli the out-of-season vargels.

“That’s ’cause we’re almost halfway through spring now. Vargels last a long time when spring stays cold for longer, but I care more about being warm. There’s more stuff to gather in the forest when it’s warm!”

Tuuli cooked the meat with salt and dressed it with the butter-sautéed

vargels. I used that time to make the spring vegetable soup.

“Myne, go call Mom,” Tuuli said.

I stealthily slipped into the bedroom, trying my best not to wake Kamil. Mom was sleeping next to him. Maybe it was due to the dark room making it hard to see, but she looked exhausted and kinda sick. I didn’t really want to disturb her, so I silently stepped back into the kitchen.

“Tuuli, it looks like Mom’s asleep...”

“That’s okay, you don’t need to wake her. Mrs. Karla was talking about this; she said it’s really important to give a mother as much rest as possible after a birth,” Tuuli explained as she set the table. It seemed the neighborhood wives had told her about a lot of stuff while she was helping with the birth. Mom looked like she would be out of commission for a decent while, which meant we would need to cover for her as a family.

“You may not realize this since you weren’t there, Myne, but Mom really had it rough when she was giving birth. She was bleeding a lot and it sounded like it hurt really bad,” Tuuli murmured, anxiously looking at the bedroom where Mom was sleeping.

I had been sent away for this birth and hadn’t witnessed any back in my Urano days either. I had read about them and heard about plenty, but I didn’t know what a real birth was like. I could only imagine how Mom felt, and it probably wasn’t a big leap to say she wasn’t in a great spot.

“We need to work hard enough that Mom doesn’t need to do any chores herself. She’ll be sick for a long time if we let her push herself too soon. Myne, we’ll be needing your help.”

“Okay.”

That night, I woke up each time Kamil began crying. It was just really hard to sleep through a baby crying in the same room as you. In the end, I was sure I had seen Mom breastfeeding Kamil through blurry eyes on four separate occasions that night. Suffice it to say, I was sleep deprived. My head felt fuzzy when I finally woke up for real.

“I think it’ll only take a few days for you to get used to sleeping through the

crying,” Mom said while stroking my head with a worried smile. I replied that I definitely wouldn’t get used to it that easily, but by the second night I managed to make it to morning while barely even registering the crying in the corner of my mind.

“...Mmm. I feel like I’m way better at adjusting to things than I thought.”

“You’re just like Dad,” said Tuuli while glaring at me through narrowed, sleep-deprived eyes. She pointed at Dad, who was still sound asleep.

The Abandoned Child

With all the special celebratory events in the neighborhood over, everybody's daily lives returned to normal. I myself would be going back to the temple starting today. Once Damuel and Fran came to get me, I first made my way to the Gilberta Company; I needed to thank them for the gift and inform Benno about how cute Kamil was. If time permitted, I could talk about the printing business too.

"He really is super tiny because he was just born. He gets all red when he cries, he's all wrinkly, and he's really just super cute. I never expected my own little brother would be so cute," I doted, telling Benno exactly what I had told Lutz, Fran, and Damuel on the way here.

Benno was grimacing and rubbing his temples. "Enough already. I've already heard what feels like a lifetime of this junk from Otto. Get to the printing business already."

"Wha? Corinna gave birth too? I didn't hear about this! When did that happen?!" I exclaimed with wide eyes.

Benno furrowed his brows. "I didn't mention it? I probably forgot to since it happened while you were stuck in the temple. Otto's been raving about his kid for so long I figured you would've heard about it from your dad, Lutz, or maybe Leon," Benno explained as his dark-red eyes shifted to Lutz, who offered a shrug in response.

"Leon said it wasn't our place to break the news in your stead, so I decided not to mention it."

"Yeah, I guess that's true. I did meet with Myne after the baby was born but, well... there was never a good time to bring it up. There was the finished metal types, and then the blue priest's tour..." Benno said, a distant look in his eyes. He had been pretty occupied on both occasions, and neither really presented a good opportunity for him to say that Corinna had given birth.

“Guess it’s better late than never. The baby was born at the end of winter. Her name’s Renate and she’ll be inheriting the Gilberta Company. Be nice to her and all that,” Benno said, his tone so flat that I couldn’t help but tilt my head in confusion. He was like the exact opposite of Dad here.

“You don’t seem very excited about this, Benno. Didn’t you really want a successor?”

“Yeah. Otto’s being more than excited enough for the both of us. He’s going to spoil the girl like a complete idiot; if I don’t whip her into shape, the Gilberta Company will fall apart the day I leave,” muttered Benno with a derisive grin. It was easy for me to imagine that he would spoil her too, even while claiming to be whipping her into shape.

“What’s with that look?”

“Oh, nothing. I was just thinking you’ll spoil her just as much as he will.”

“Careful now,” Benno said with a glare.

But I just shrugged. “Renate will be fine with Corinna raising her. She’ll grow up to be a businesswoman that keeps a calm, gentle look on her face while securing as much profit as she can in any given situation.”

It was easy to be fooled by Corinna’s gentle demeanor, but thinking back there had been a lot of times where she’d led me to spill valuable information without me realizing it. Benno would point out when I was being naive and dropped hints to help me realize when I was being tricked, but Corinna did nothing of the sort. She wrung me dry with a disarming smile. When it came to business, Freida was forward to the point of being kind of off-putting, but Corinna got her information through casual chats.

...In terms of business, she’s actually scarier than Freida.

Honestly, when it came to merchants, Benno was definitely the softest one of them all. The parental sense of responsibility he had developed when training me as his apprentice was probably still lingering in the back of his mind and encouraging him to be kinder with me.

“I’m the one who raised Corinna, y’know?”

“Then the Gilberta Company will be safe for a long time yet.”

“Of course,” replied Benno with a nod before cutting to the chase. “But anyway, you said you had some news about the printing business?”

“The High Priest told me to hold off on movable type printing for now. If we charge forward, we’ll end up clashing with the vested interests—the nobility. It’s a fight we have no chance of winning.”

“...The vested interests are nobles? Yeah, the winning move here is to not play.”

Benno loved to pick fights with vested interests, but even he had no intention of going toe to toe with nobles. Feeling relieved, I told him what the High Priest had told me.

“Most book copying is actually done by nobles, so it’s important that I don’t try to make thick, adult-oriented books packed with words. But the High Priest said they won’t interfere so long as I just keep making kids’ books, so for the next couple of years I’ll be putting my all into making picture books for children.”

Benno shot me a glare. “Putting your all into it...? Alright, I need to hear more about this.”

I gave a big nod and announced my plans for the Myne Workshop. “To be specific, I’ll be developing colored ink to color the pictures. I’d then like to develop wax stencils to further improve stencil printing. We really need to hurry if we want to have it done in time.”

“...Have it done in time for what?” asked Benno, confused.

I proudly puffed out my chest. “I need to make books to match the growth of my cute little Kamil. I’ll be putting my all into this for him, so I would appreciate you introducing me to a wax workshop soon.”

“Do you have the High Priest’s permission to do that?” Benno asked with a grimace that was absolutely dripping with skepticism. But I would never do anything crazy when both Benno and the High Priest were always yelling at me to get permission for everything and report every little detail.

“The High Priest said picture books wouldn’t clash with the vested interests, and he was the one to tell me to add color to my picture books in the first place. He was all like, ‘Wilma’s art is wasted in black and white, books should have color, blah blah blah...’”

“I’m happy as long as you’ve got permission. I’ll set up a meeting between you and the foreman of a wax workshop.”

And so, when my business with Benno was done, I left the Gilberta Company having secured a future trip to a wax workshop.

“Good morning. I have returned.”

“Welcome back, Sister Myne.”

Delia and Rosina greeted me at my chambers and changed me into my blue robes. I told them about Kamil while I waited for them to finish.

“The other day, my little brother was born. His name is Kamil. He is very small, wrinkly, goes red when he cries, and is overall very cute.”

“Sister Myne, he does not sound cute at all when you put it like that,” Rosina replied with a giggle. Kamil’s wrinkly redness really was cute, but my words didn’t seem to be doing him any justice.

“You know, Sister Myne, whether or not your little brother’s cute doesn’t matter to us at all. Why even tell us about him?” Delia asked.

“I want as many people to know about him as possible. When he was born, I was told it was important for people to remember his birth.”

When I eventually got all of my preaching about Kamil’s cuteness out of my system, it was time to begin harspiel practice for the day.

After a short while, Rosina’s teaching was interrupted by a knock on the first floor door. A bit later, Fran came upstairs.

“Forgive my interruption, Sister Myne. Wilma has urgent business,” he said, a tinge of worry in his voice.

“You may let her in,” I said.

Urgent business from Wilma meant something had happened in the orphanage. I had Delia put away my harspiel and moved to the table, ready to welcome Wilma.

She came up the stairs to the second floor carrying a baby in her arms—one a little bigger than Kamil. Both Wilma and Fran looked at me for help.

“Wilma, where might that baby have come from?” I asked. At the very least, I hadn’t heard of any of the gray shrine maidens in the temple getting pregnant. It was apparently normal for attendants of blue priests to be returned to the orphanage after becoming pregnant, so the one thing I knew for sure was that the baby hadn’t been born here.

“It was abandoned. The guard said the baby was left with him...”

According to Wilma, a gray priest had been standing guard at the gate to the lower city like usual when, all of a sudden, a lone woman hastily approached him. She then handed him a small bundle, saying it was an offering to the gods. It wasn’t particularly rare for people to bring such offerings or to give donations after being helped by the gods, so the guard had accepted the bundle without giving it much thought.

“When the guard untied the bundle to see what had been offered, he found this baby inside.” It was standard procedure for the guards to check what was in an offering before giving it to the blue priests.

“She offered her child to the gods...?”

When parents could neither kill nor raise a child, they were left with no choice but to bring them to the orphanage and entrust their future to the gods. The baby was a little bigger than Kamil and could move its head around, but it was still too small to walk. I couldn’t help but feel anger at the mother who had abandoned it.

“As you are the orphanage director, Sister Myne, I brought it here first. Whatever shall we do?”

The orphanage director’s permission was needed before a new child could be accepted into the orphanage, but this was the first time since becoming orphanage director that I had needed to deal with this, so I didn’t know what

steps I needed to take.

“I am not sure what to do, I am afraid. This has not happened before in my time as director. I will have to consult the High Priest once again. Fran, could you request an emergency meeting?”

“As you wish,” said Fran. I could imagine it was his first time dealing with this too, and he hastily walked out of the room with a troubled expression. Meanwhile, the baby was snoozing in Wilma’s arm, completely unaware of our worries.

“The baby certainly is a sound sleeper,” I said. Its small, sleeping form reminded me of Kamil, which brought a smile to my face.

...This baby’s cute too, but my little Kamil is way, way cuter. No doubt about it.

“We are fine as long as it stays asleep, but I do not know what to do when it awakes. There are no longer any gray shrine maidens here who have given birth. What shall we do without anyone to give the baby milk...?” asked Wilma.

In the past, a baby brought to the temple could simply be taken to the cellar where new mothers and still pregnant gray shrine maidens could feed them. They would raise the baby like their own child. But now the pregnant shrine maidens were gone, and the accumulated knowledge they had shared in that basement had gone with them.

The remaining shrine maidens and apprentices were all younger girls who had never been involved in offering flowers. They had been raised in an orphanage, not having parents to tell them about pregnancy, birthing, and child rearing, so nobody knew what to do with a baby.

“Do you know how to raise a baby without a mother, Sister Myne?”

“I have read about goat milk being used by mothers who cannot produce their own. I believe it is better for them than cow milk. It will take time, but we should be able to feed the baby spoonful by spoonful,” I explained.

That was all information I had learned from a fiction book set during the middle of a war, but Wilma looked as though her entire world had been given light. Her eyes were shining with admiration and respect.

“I thank you ever so much, Sister Myne. I will prepare some at once.”

“We will need to prepare diapers and baby clothes for it as well,” I said, remembering what we had needed for Kamil, but Wilma shook her head.

“We have enough left over from when we used to care for babies here. We may need to prepare more at some point, but we will be fine for now.”

“I see.”

When Fran returned from talking to the High Priest, I asked him to fetch goat milk, at which point the baby awoke and started crying and sucking on its fingers.

“I believe the baby is hungry,” I said.

Wilma began carrying small spoons of milk to the baby’s mouth. At first it shook its head in protest, aware that Wilma wasn’t its mother, but eventually hunger won out and it began drinking the goat milk bit by bit.

Everyone sighed in relief at the sight. At the very least, we had managed to avoid the baby starving to death.

Third bell rang out. The baby flinched in surprise at the sound, but continued to drink the milk, having clearly prioritized hunger over surprise.

“Fran, let us go to the High Priest. Sir Damuel, I ask for your protection.”

The three of us hastily walked to the High Priest’s room. My urge to be a good older sister was strong in my mind thanks to Kamil being born, and it made me want to prepare a living space for the baby as soon as possible.

“High Priest, we have something to discuss.”

I met with the High Priest and informed him of the abandoned baby, then asked him what procedures I would need to follow and in what ways I should look after it.

“Can you not merely do as has been done before?”

“I’m discussing this with you because there are no gray shrine maidens who have given birth and raised kids in the orphanage anymore,” I said, and the High Priest widened his eyes with realization.

“So there aren’t. But there is no use yearning for what is already gone. I suppose there are always wet nurses... Unfortunately, I have no experience raising children either.”

“There are wet nurses we can hire?” I asked, my eyes shining. Having one would make things a lot easier.

But alas, the High Priest slowly shook his head. “...Only if we can find one eccentric enough to willingly come to the orphanage.”

“That won’t be easy.”

The High Priest had probably spoken from the mindset of raising a noble child. However, it was hard to imagine anyone in the lower city willingly going to the orphanage, considering how looked down upon it was. Mom might be willing to help, but that would have to wait until she was healthy again; I couldn’t ask her to come now when she was too weak to even help with chores.

I immediately concluded it would be impossible to bring a wet nurse here. For now, I would have to rely on my attendants to take care of the baby. That would be a big burden on everyone, but it was our only choice if we wanted the baby to live.

“What should we name it? There wasn’t a name on its clothes or the cloth.”

“You may name it what you like. As long as it does not overlap with any other orphan’s name, it does not matter.”

“Understood.”

Our conversation over, I returned to my room at once. The baby was in a good mood, having been fed and changed into a new diaper by Wilma. According to her, it was in fact a boy.

“We will have to take turns watching him. Wilma would collapse if she had to watch over him all on her lonesome.”

That probably hadn’t been a problem when there were several mothers and pregnant women in the basement, but none of the gray shrine maidens in the orphanage had dealt with babies before. They didn’t know how to handle one, nor did they have anyone they could ask for advice. I couldn’t ask Wilma to take

on the baby all by herself when there was nobody else she could rely on for help. Anyone who tried that would end up overwhelmed and exhausted.

“He will beg to be fed during the night as well. We will need at least one person to stay up at night and one person to wake up early if anyone is going to be sleeping.”

We decided that Wilma would watch him in the orphanage during the day, while the rest of my attendants would collectively watch over him in my chamber during the night. Rosina was already used to staying up late, so she would stay up later for him while Fran would go to bed early to wake up early as well. Once Delia awoke, she would then watch over him until Wilma came.

“Geez! Why do I have to look after him?!” Delia demanded. Listening to my orders as her mistress was one thing, but to her, looking after an abandoned baby every day was something else entirely. I did understand how she felt, but the baby would die if we didn’t look after him.

I carefully looked at Delia. Was there something I could say here that would get through to her? I needed something that would make Delia actively want to look after the baby.

I thought for a moment, then it hit me—Delia had looked envious when she said that she didn’t know what a family was like. She no doubt had a strong attachment to the idea of having a family.

“I believe it is your duty to look after him, Delia. You are his big sister, after all.”

“What? Big sister?” Delia replied, looking between me and the baby with a dumbfounded expression.

“You are too young to be his mother, Delia, so what else would you be but his big sister? Please take care of him as you would a family member. He is your family now.”

“My... family...?” she repeated, as if still processing what the words meant as she looked at the baby.

“I became a big sister myself just the other day, and now you are a big sister too, Delia. Shall we compete to see who can be the better big sister?”



“I’m obviously going to win!” Delia declared, puffing out her chest and giving it a confident thump. She would probably dedicate her all to looking after him now, like a good big sister should. At heart, Delia was a straightforward person and a hard worker who didn’t hesitate to dedicate herself to things.

My other attendants watched Delia’s sudden enthusiasm with clear amusement. But if a young girl like Delia would be putting her all into raising the baby, the burden on Fran and Rosina would definitely be lessened.

“First, let’s decide on a name. It can’t be one that someone in the orphanage already has, but other than that it’s up to us. Does anyone have any requests?”

“I want him to have a name like mine. Like family would,” Delia said while peering eagerly at the baby in Wilma’s arms.

Hopefully that makes her more attached to him, I thought while thinking of a name that sounded kind of like “Delia.”

“A name like ‘Delia’... What about ‘Deita’ or ‘Dirk’?”

“Deita... Dirk... I think I like ‘Dirk’!” Delia said, her face radiating blatant approval. “Dirk, it’s me, your big sister,” she continued, reaching out a hand toward Dirk. He gave a lopsided smile as she stroked his head.

“Did you see that, Sister Myne?! He smiled!”

“...Wow, Delia. Kamil only ever cries with me,” I said, a little disappointed that Delia was already proving to be a more powerful older sister than I was.

I resolved to look after Kamil as much as I could once I was back home to raise my own big sister power, but Mom and Tuuli were doing so much by themselves that there was barely anything left for me. It didn’t help that I didn’t get some key aspect of changing diapers. Whenever I tried, Kamil would start peeing for some reason, making a mess everywhere.

“Oh, an abandoned child was given to the orphanage? It must be rough without a woman to look after him,” Mom said while giving Kamil milk.

“So, Mom, do you think there’s anything I can do?”

“Well, napping during the day will make night feeds that much easier. Why

don't you try to make sure everyone looking after the baby gets as much sleeping time as possible?"

Her advice came from a place of much experience, so I gave a big nod.

"Okay, I'll learn to change Kamil's and Dirk's diapers so you and everyone else can take more naps."

"Please do. I don't have very high hopes though," Mom said with a smile.

When I went to the temple the next day, Fran and Rosina both looked exhausted.

It really was difficult for them to switch up their normal sleep patterns to feed Dirk goat milk throughout the night. They would need to nap during the day, no doubt about it.

"Fran, Rosina, please nap for about a bell after eating breakfast. Use this time to rest since you'll have to wake up during the night."

"As you wish. Thank you," replied both Fran and Rosina, looking relieved.

It was hard work for mothers to look after their own children, so looking after someone else's baby that had showed up in the orphanage out of nowhere one day must have been especially tough.

"More importantly, Sister Myne, there is something wrong with Dirk," Delia said anxiously while looking at the baby. He was fast asleep, though I couldn't see anything wrong with him.

"It happened in the morning. Dirk started to cry, but as the milk wasn't ready yet, we let him keep crying. But then he got a fever, and his cheeks started to bubble. He calmed down as soon as we gave him milk, but we have no idea what happened," said Fran, who had apparently seen it too.

But Dirk's cheeks looked normal to me. I tilted my head in confusion.

"I think we will need to hold off on the milk and let him cry a little more. I will need to see this for myself before I can say anything. It is a shame that there is nobody here who could tell us whether this is normal for babies."

We all watched as Dirk began to cry from hunger. Before long, the crying became high-pitched shrieks, and he really did get a fever out of nowhere.

“See, Sister Myne? He’s burning up.”

I touched Dirk and felt a shock entirely like static electricity, before seemingly being pushed away from his skin. Dirk’s crying intensified.

“Sister Myne, his cheeks have started to get bumpy again.”

“Delia, give him milk right away.”

“Understood. Here you are, Dirk,” said Delia while holding a small spoon in front of his mouth.

Dirk stopped crying the second the milk was in his mouth, instead focusing on sipping it down. His cheeks returned to normal and his fever went down in the blink of an eye. Nothing happened when I touched him now.

“Fran, ask the High Priest for another meeting. Preferably one as soon as possible,” I said in a sharp voice. He left at once, and Delia gave me an anxious look.

“Sister Myne, do you know what’s happening?”

“I cannot say for sure, and I do not want to worry you by making a wrong guess,” I replied with a shake of my head, lowering my eyes.

I would have liked for my guess to be wrong, but it probably wasn’t—Dirk had the Devouring. And on top of that, he had enough mana that it would kill him as a baby.

Delia, whose eyes had wavered with unease when I said I couldn’t answer her question, gave Dirk a protective squeeze.

What To Do About Dirk

If Dirk had a severe case of the Devouring, his life would be in danger unless he was given access to a magic tool that could suck the large amount of mana out of him. I needed to do whatever I could to ensure his safety, even if just by a little bit.

“Lutz, could I ask you to do something? I want you to go to the forest and get some taue fruit. They’ll last if you put them on the dirt part of the floor in the workshop’s storage area, right?” I called Lutz from the workshop up to the second floor of my chambers, then whispered my request so Damuel by the door wouldn’t hear me. It would be better if nobles did not learn of taue fruit.

I glanced Dirk’s way, and Lutz gave a small nod before immediately running off to the forest, having extrapolated the circumstances just from my small gesture. Once he got back, we’d be able to stop Dirk from losing control of his mana and dying from it.

“Sister Myne, I have gotten permission for a meeting.” Fran returned, wearing an exhausted expression. Both Arno and the High Priest had looked annoyed at having two emergency meetings requested in a row, but urgent business was urgent business; I needed to see the High Priest to learn whether Dirk really had the Devouring, how much mana he had, and what we needed to do with him.

“I suppose we shouldn’t give Dirk to Wilma yet, since we’ll be bringing him to the High Priest’s room. Fran, would you carry him?”

I intended to go to the High Priest’s room with Dirk since everything revolved around him, but Delia hugged him protectively and Fran slowly shook his head.

“Sister Myne, we cannot take a pre-baptism orphan out of the orphanage.”

My chambers counted as part of the orphanage since they were in the same building, but apparently taking him to the High Priest’s room was no good. I had forgotten that we weren’t supposed to take them out since we were stealthily taking the kids to the forest, but now that I thought about it, the pre-baptism

kids were supposed to be still stuck inside the orphanage so that the blue priests wouldn't have to see them.

"...I thought that bringing Dirk would be important for the discussion with the High Priest, but if you insist."

I brought Fran and Damuel with me to the High Priest's room, as I always did. Once inside, the High Priest gave a slight grimace of annoyance and asked, "What is it this time?"

"The matter I want to discuss is very important. Is it something we should talk about out here?" I said in a quiet voice, pointing my eyes toward the hidden room.

The High Priest raised an eyebrow, then held out the sound-blocking magic tool. I firmly gripped it.

"This discussion is important enough for you to actually pay attention to your surroundings and think?"

"...Yes. It's about Dirk, the baby from yesterday. I believe he has the Devouring."

After I explained what Dirk had looked like this morning, the High Priest's brow furrowed hard and he let out a heavy sigh. "I would say it depends on how much mana he has, but given those physical symptoms, it would be safe to say that he has quite a sizable amount."

"So he has the Devouring for sure?"

"Indeed." The High Priest gave me a grave nod before rapping a finger lightly against his temple. "It would probably be wise for him to sign with a noble as soon as possible."

"A contract..."

"He will not survive otherwise."

I tightened my grip on the sound-blocking magic tool. Signing a contract meant selling your life to a noble. In return for being given the magic tools you needed to survive, you would spend your whole life enslaved to them, essentially becoming a walking mana tank for your noble to drain. I shuddered

at the thought of Dirk, a baby as young as my little brother, suffering a fate like that.

“High Priest, could you not make him a blue priest that offers up mana like myself, or otherwise set up an adoption with a noble?”

“It will cost a significant amount to raise the baby as a blue priest. Who will pay for that?”

Having become a blue shrine maiden myself, I knew all too well how much money it cost to live like this. I had almost run out of money preparing for winter despite the Myne Workshop supporting me; clothes, shoes, and pretty much every other little thing was expensive.

“You have been able to cover your expenses by earning your own money,” the High Priest continued, “but do you expect an orphan baby to do the same?”

“...No.”

“Or are you suggesting that you will cover both of your expenses? Would you pay that much for a baby that has no blood relation to you? Is that something your family would permit? Even if so, would that not be the orphanage director showing favoritism to a single orphan?”

I fell silent. I wasn't even sure I could afford to cover both of our expenses forever, and it was forbidden in the orphanage to prioritize one orphan over the others. I wanted to help him, but I couldn't think of what to do. All I could do was keep quiet.

The High Priest, seeing my hesitation, softened his expression. “In regard to having a noble adopt him, all adoptions need direct authorization from the archduke. It is not possible for me to simply engineer one wherever I like. In your case, it was determined that you and your quantity of mana, talent for earning money, and otherworldly wisdom being put in the care of an archnoble would be for the best for the city,” he said, indirectly revealing that there had been a lot of background forces at play when he was arranging for me to be adopted by Karstedt. The High Priest had clearly stuck his neck out and worked hard for my sake.

“Myne, am I correct to assume the baby is a male?”

“Yes.”

Oh, right—we hadn’t checked to see the baby’s sex when I spoke to the High Priest yesterday. He must have determined its gender by me calling it a “he.”

“That will make things more difficult...” he said with a slow shake of his head. “I believe I mentioned before that it is the mother’s mana that influences how much mana her children have. A female baby might have had a future being adopted, though she would have been passed off as a natural child rather than an adopted one so that she could be used as a pawn for political marriage.”

I bit my lip. Maybe it was just because I had my memories of living as a Japanese person, but I considered being a pawn for political marriage and being enslaved via lifelong contract not much different.

“There is a slight chance that a noble might want to adopt him given the current mana shortage, but I can say nothing for certain until I have measured the baby’s quantity of mana. Tomorrow morning... Yes, at third bell tomorrow, I will come to your chambers with a magic tool for measuring mana. I imagine that is alright?”

“Absolutely. I shall be waiting,” I said, handing the High Priest the sound-blocking magic tool. But he handed it right back to me. I cocked my head in confusion and took it back, wondering if he had forgotten to say something.

“Myne, who else knows that this baby has the Devouring?”

I lowered my eyes in thought. None of my attendants were familiar with the Devouring. Fran had asked me about Dirk’s symptoms since even he couldn’t recognize them on sight. Lutz could probably guess since I had asked for the taue fruit and then gestured toward Dirk, but none of my attendants would know what that meant.

“I think I’m the only one who firmly understands that Dirk’s symptoms are being caused by mana.”

“In that case, continue keeping this a secret. Be particularly careful that the High Bishop does not learn of this.”

“...Understood.”

I would have to keep it hidden from Delia that Dirk had the Devouring; if she didn't know about the Devouring, she couldn't inform the High Bishop about it. I felt a little sad that I had to hide things about Dirk from Delia despite her showing him so much love as she strove to be a good older sister.

The next day, at third bell, the High Priest visited my chambers with Arno. We had finished feeding Dirk and changed his diaper ahead of time. He often, er, *did his business* right after we put his new diaper on, but there was no helping that.

One interesting thing, though, was that Dirk didn't cry very much. He generally had a happy smile on his face as long as his diaper was clean and his belly was full. He was rarely fussy when put to bed and didn't require as much upkeep as most babies might, which was much appreciated by everyone.

Incidentally, our Kamil cried a lot more than Dirk. He was especially noisy when he wanted to sleep, and he wouldn't fall asleep unless Mom was carrying him. I couldn't tell whether this contrast was due to the difference in age or whether it was just down to their personalities.

At the moment, Dirk was sleeping on top of a large straw-stuffed cushion set in the corner of my room. Delia was sitting next to it, looking after him. The cushion was Dirk's bed and could be easily moved to the first floor when Fran was looking after him, then to Rosina's and Delia's rooms on the second floor when it was their turn.

I heard a door open on the first floor, then heard Fran say, "Good morning, High Priest."

"Where is the baby?"

"The second floor. Please follow me."

Delia, realizing from Fran's voice that the High Priest had come, dropped her happy smile and turned to look at the staircase with a hard frown. To me, the High Priest was someone I could rely on for anything and everything, but it seemed Delia saw him as someone who wasn't to be trusted.

"I thank you ever so much for coming all this way."

“Myne, clear the room.”

Arno set a magic tool down onto the table and crossed his arms in front of his chest before stepping back. It was a circlet studded with small magic stones like those on the divine instruments.

“Please leave, everyone.” I cleared the room, and Delia looked uneasily between me and Dirk, who was still resting on his cushion, while slowly walking down the stairs.

Once everyone was gone, the High Priest took out the sound-blocking magic tool. “Clearing the room is not enough to prevent our voices from being heard downstairs,” he explained.

After grabbing the sound-blocking magic tool, I walked toward where Dirk was sleeping. The High Priest followed with the mana-measuring magic tool. He pressed the magic stone against Dirk’s head, and the circlet shrunk to fit him perfectly. At this point, something that minor wasn’t enough to surprise me even a little bit.

“Oh, the stones are changing colors.” I knew very well from offering up my mana to the divine instruments that feystones changed color when absorbing mana. That was apparently how noble children had their mana measured when they were born.

Once the color changing slowed, the High Priest removed the circlet and counted the number of differently colored stones.

“Hm. He has about as much as a mednoble on the stronger side.”

“...A mednoble? I would have thought he had more mana than me.” Myne had lived up to the age of five with the Devouring, so Dirk being close to death already made me think he had much more mana than I did, but apparently that wasn’t the case.

“A baby so ruled by emotions it is incapable of controlling mana and a small girl with the mind of an adult are incomparable in mental strength. But most importantly, you have been compressing your mana without anyone having taught you how to, no?”

The High Priest explained that as one grew used to controlling mana, they

could compress it and fit more into their body. He could estimate how much mana Myne had from the fact that it was enough to eat her alive at five years old. Dirk probably had more mana than she did when she was born, but then I awoke in her mind and successfully pushed the heat deep inside of me, which made space for more mana to grow. Each time the mana filled up and started to rampage within me, I compressed it even deeper inside of me, making even more space. This process repeated until I basically had a stupid amount of mana.

The High Priest went on to say that I had an enormous amount compressed within my small body—so much that it was hard to believe I could contain it at all. Compressing mana like that was apparently a technique that nobles usually learned in the Royal Academy before puberty hit.

“Doesn’t that mean all nobles could have more mana if they practiced from a young age?”

“Don’t imply it’s so simple, fool. Allowing mana to fill your entire body before containing it with sheer force of mind is to dance with death, putting yourself on the verge of being eaten alive. You have experience with that, no?”

“Yes, it’s happened countless times.” It really was hard to count how many times I had battled with the heat to push it back inside of my body. In the end, I had so much mana because, over the year and a half that had passed between me starting to live as Myne and me joining the temple, I had spent every day on the verge of death.

“It is difficult to compress mana without having a mind strong enough to force it into place. Does it not make sense to wait until children grow and can be taught the proper methods for doing so? Every year, there are a number of students who fail to control their mana and consequently have a brush with death.”

Brushes with death had been a normal daily affair for me, but noble children were given magic tools from birth to shield them from such danger. They just poured their mana into these tools until they could go to the Royal Academy and learn to control it. Blue priests didn’t go to the academy and so never learned to control or increase their mana, which meant they were stuck pouring

away their mana forever.

“Well, your case is irrelevant here. There might be some who would like to adopt a Devouring child with such an abundance of mana due to the mana shortage, but given that we are in the process of concealing information to keep you safe, it would be dangerous to spread word of us seeking a family for a Devouring child.”

If an adoption wasn't possible, I at least wanted Dirk to sign with a family who would treat him right. I looked up at the High Priest. “Um, High Priest, could you sign a contract with Dirk?”

“I could, but I will not. I have absolutely no need for that baby's mana.”

It turned out that it was largely nobles restrained by a lack of mana who signed with Devouring children. They were driven by their want of mana for maintaining their land and using their noble magic tools. Devouring contracts weren't something they wanted to be particularly public, so while well-raised children would be given positions as servants or future mistresses, those who were poorly raised would often be locked in the cellar and treated like animals... which explained why the guildmaster was spending so much money on raising Freida like a noble.

I stared at the floor sadly as I thought about what Dirk's future held, which made the High Priest give an exasperated sigh. “If you are that concerned about him, you can sign with him yourself after Karstedt adopts you.”

“...Me?” I asked, blinking in surprise. I hadn't even considered signing with Dirk myself when I became a noble.

“Upon being adopted, you will have the noble status necessary to form such a contract. Hide the nature of his sickness and raise him in the orphanage until then.”

“I thank you ever so much.”

If I signed with Dirk, nobody would be able to complain that me raising him properly was a show of favoritism. Though I would have to listen to the High Priest and Karstedt's advice—the latter because he would be my adoptive father. All I had to do was hide Dirk's Devouring until then. It seemed that his

future would be brighter than I thought.

As I rejoiced, the High Priest narrowed his eyes as if glaring at me. “Myne, this is no time to be rejoicing. The High Bishop will no doubt seek to exploit the baby if he learns of his Devouring. You defy him at every opportunity, whereas the baby has no will of its own. It is clear which of you he will attempt to make his own. If you wish to protect him, keep his secret safe until the very end.”

The High Bishop would want to use Dirk’s mana for his own means, and if the High Bishop demanded custody of Dirk, I had no means of refusing him.

“You would do well to always remember that your position in the temple and your future will be greatly determined by whether or not you can protect that baby.”

“Understood.”

After telling me that Dirk’s mana would be contained for a bit thanks to the mana-measuring tool draining him of mana, the High Priest took the circlet and left. Delia came running up the stairs a second later.

“Sister Myne, what did the High Priest say?! What is Dirk sick with?”

“He’s fine,” I said with a slow shake of my head. “The High Priest said to continue raising him as we have been.”

“I see... That’s such a relief.” Delia’s tense shoulders loosened as she hugged Dirk, rubbing her cheeks against his. The sight was a firm reminder that I couldn’t let any other noble adopt Dirk, nor sign a submission contract with him.

“Sister Myne, I have come for Dirk,” came another voice.

“Thank you, Wilma.”

Fran and Rosina went on break in the afternoon, and since they couldn’t rest easy with Dirk around, we would move him to the orphanage. Delia watched on sorrowfully as Wilma picked Dirk up and left for the orphanage with him.

“You can accompany him to the orphanage if you would like, Delia.”

“But Fran and Rosina are on break, and Gil is at the workshop. Sister Myne, you would have no attendants on hand if I went now.” Delia shot me a sharp

look over the very idea.

“I do not mind coming with you.”

“Sister Myne, I think I mentioned that I didn’t want to go to the orphanage,” she responded coldly.

“I suppose you did,” I replied casually while heading to my desk. It wouldn’t be ideal for me to wander around outside my room while both Fran and Rosina were taking a break, so I decided to just focus on making a second black-and-white picture book for Dirk. Unlike Kamil, who had just been born, Dirk was already on the verge of rolling over in bed. He was surely almost old enough to see black-and-white picture books properly.

“Sister Myne, what do you think Dirk is doing right now?”

“Napping, I imagine.”

I drew pictures composed of circles and triangles on white paper using ink. All I had to do next was use the hide glue we had dried over the winter to stick the paper onto boards. I would have Fran prepare the hide glue for me when he woke up. Dad could then open holes in the boards, and after tying them together with thick string the book would be done.

“Sister Myne, do you think Dirk is crying, or maybe feeling lonely?”

“I imagine he isn’t feeling lonely with all of the children around. Though it may be too noisy for him to sleep.”

“But Dirk needs his sleep!”

“Raising your voice at me won’t change anything. I cannot even say for sure whether it is noisy over there,” I replied disinterestedly while writing down a to-do list on my diptych.

First, I needed to buy multiple different kinds of wax from a wax workshop. Stencils used for mimeograph printing were usually made with resin mixed into the wax to help them retain their form, but my plan was to try rolling using only wax this time. If it worked, it worked, but who knew what problems might arise?

“Sister Myne, aren’t you worried about Dirk?”

“Not really, since Wilma is keeping a close eye on him.”

Next, I wanted to talk to someone from an ink workshop about making colored ink. Nothing in the orphanage seemed like it would be a good material for making pigments, so maybe a workshop could help us with that.

“You can’t be sure of that. Geez! Sister Myne, are you even listening to me?” Delia exploded with anger after I kept giving half-hearted replies.

I looked up from my diptych to give her an exaggerated sigh. “If you’re that worried about him, go and check for yourself. Wilma would love to have you there.”

“...I don’t want to go to the orphanage.” Delia bit her lip in frustration. The conflict she was having between wanting to go and not wanting to go was clear on her face.

“Very well. Would you like me to go and check on him, then?”

“N-No fair!” Delia grabbed my sleeve.

I couldn’t help but laugh. I had only said that because I knew it wouldn’t be “ladylike” for me to leave my room without attendants, and she had jumped on the bait like a tiger.

“In that case, Delia, why not come with me?”

Delia’s light-blue eyes wavered and she swung her crimson red hair as she fought an internal battle. When she looked up, she glared at me with watery eyes and bit her lip once more.

“...I won’t go.”

I shrugged and turned back to face my desk, having no reason to argue with her decision. She didn’t say anything after that. All she did was wander around aimlessly. But somehow, I felt that Dirk was so cute that it was only a matter of time before Delia would be running to the orphanage.

The Ink Guild and Succession

“Myne, Master Benno told me to ask when the next day you’re free is,” said Lutz.

It was about ten days after Kamil’s birth that the Gilberta Company called for a meeting with me. I guessed that Benno had found a wax workshop to take me to—or rather, that was the only reason I could think of for him to call me over.

“He wants to take me to a wax workshop, right? It’s better if I have Fran with me, so how about the day after tomorrow in the morning?”

“Nah, apparently there’s someone who wants to meet you.”

“...Whaaat? Aw.” My hype died in an instant. I wanted to go to a wax workshop as soon as possible, but my dreams were not being granted. I agreed to go, albeit with pursed lips.

“You might want to bring Gil with you instead of Fran. Master Benno said it’s a craftsman from an ink workshop.”

Those words made my hype roar back up like a reborn phoenix. I had been wanting to meet someone from an ink workshop to talk about developing new ink; this would be a good opportunity to talk about making colored ink.

“Eheheh. I can’t wait, Lutz.”

“Your mood sure improved fast.” Lutz shot me an exasperated look, which made me realize something. The deceased head of the Ink Guild had been probing for information about me. Maybe the new head was carrying on his legacy.

“...Um, wait, should I really be meeting and talking with someone from the Ink Guild?” I asked worriedly.

Lutz looked at me, then fell into thought for a second before replying: “If Master Benno thinks it’s fine, it probably is.”

“Okay. I’ll go ahead and look forward to it then.”

On the scheduled morning, Lutz came to get me, and we departed for the Gilberta Company with Damuel and Gil. Even though Mark seemed really busy, he still came outside upon noticing us through the store window.

“Good morning, Lady Myne. Your visitors are already here.”

“Good morning, Mark. Would you be so kind as to take a moment from your busy day to guide us to them?”

With his usual calm smile, Mark guided us to Benno’s office in the Gilberta Company building, where I found a familiar-looking foreman and a not-so-familiar young woman waiting. The ink workshop foreman had his brows furrowed in the same high-strung way I remembered from last time.

I could tell that the young woman had come of age because she had done her reddish-brown hair up, though it was just a single braid that she had twisted into a bun, so I could guess she didn’t care all that much about appearances. The way her gray, curiosity-filled eyes flitted all over made her look really young.

“Hey, hey, Dad. Is that her?”

“She’s rich. Don’t point.”

Apparently, they were father and daughter. He warned her in a lower voice, and she immediately hid her pointing finger behind her back. But her eyes—two little balls of unceasing curiosity—remained locked on me.

“Good morning, Lady Myne.” Benno welcomed me into his office and gestured for me to sit next to him. I nodded and looked up at Damuel, who smoothly escorted me there and helped seat me with trained elegance. I expected nothing less from a noble.

“I’m Bierce. Wolf passed away, and now I’m the new head of the Ink Guild. I didn’t want this, but now that I’ve taken the job, I want to do as much as I can to help save the Guild,” the foreman said before rubbing his brow and explaining what was happening in the Ink Guild.

Apparently, the circumstances of Wolf’s death had been very suspicious, and

none of the ink workshop foremen in Ehrenfest wanted the job. Nobody had stepped up to the plate, instead trying to push the responsibility onto someone else until Bierce ultimately took the fall.

My sympathy.

“I don’t like speaking ill of the dead, but... Wolf went too far and got involved in things he really shouldn’t have,” Bierce said, his head hung low. It seemed he was having an extremely hard time cleaning up after all of Wolf’s messes, which had been mercilessly pushed onto him.

He continued, kind of mumbling his words like someone not used to talking much. “I want to keep the workshops running and bring them all together. But I’m not a good talker, as you can tell. I’m no salesman.”

Normally, ink workshops just had to make ink; the actual selling was done by merchants from the Merchant’s Guild or local stores. But there was only one stationery store in the lower city that sold ink, and Wolf had been using forceful measures to monopolize business with nobles.

“The craftsmen were fine making ink no matter how it was sold, but somebody’s got to deal with the nobles now that Wolf’s dead. You wouldn’t expect the old man running the stationery store to suddenly have to start dealing with nobles out of nowhere, would you?”

Business with nobles brought in a lot of profit, but there were more than enough problems to balance that out. From my perspective, Benno may have been dealing with nobles no problem, but in reality he was deeply on edge whenever he met with Sylvester or the High Priest, with plenty of stress-induced headaches following afterward. That was reasonable—there was a lot you had to memorize just to greet nobles, and a single mistake could financially ruin you.

It would just be cruel to expect a store used to casually dealing with the richer demographic in the lower city to suddenly have to do business with nobles. The store owner wouldn’t know how to deal with them, and neither would his leherls or successor. They would have no real opportunity to learn about nobles, and they would be replacing someone who had died in a mysterious way while dealing with them. Nobody would agree to that.

...Anyone would run away if they thought nobles were involved.

In reality, only the owners of the largest stores in the city had direct relations with nobles. There really weren't many, and if you thought of which of those stores could reasonably deal in ink, the number shrank even further.

"The guildmaster's store deals in goods for nobles, doesn't it? Why don't you ask him?" Benno asked with a raised eyebrow. The fact that he hadn't offered to sell the ink himself and had instead thrown the offer the guildmaster's way probably meant that the ink business was really unattractive, had a lot of problems attached to it, or just wasn't an area that Benno was interested in spreading his business into.

Bierce, having seemingly hoped Benno would take up the job, slumped forward in disappointment and shook his head. "I wish I could, but this is all stuff the guildmaster's store was dealing with in the past. Then Wolf monopolized things the second he became head of the Ink Guild. You can guess what'll happen if I go to him, right?"

Benno grimaced, having immediately imagined what kind of an attitude the guildmaster would have. "He'd wring you dry. I can see that geezer's nasty grin already."

"Yeah. That's why I wanted to ask you."

It wouldn't be strange for the Gilberta Company to start selling ink as they were already selling books made by the Myne Workshop, which had invented the new ink in the first place and was guaranteed to become a large customer. But Benno just rubbed his temples and shook his head.

"It's not that simple. There're gonna be nobles wanting me to keep up whatever shady stuff Wolf was doing, and if I start selling ink, the guildmaster's gonna give me an even harder time than he already is."

I looked up at Benno. "So you'd let someone else take the business?"

I could understand Benno's hesitation, but if another store started doing business with the Ink Guild, I would have to do business with them too. It was exhausting just thinking about how long it would take for them to not judge me based on appearances and start doing real business with me.

“We already know that I’ll need a lot of ink when I want to start printing with the Myne Workshop. I would rather do business with you than anyone else, Benno.”

“See? The girl’s saying it too. C’mon, Benno.”

“Mmm, but, y’know...” Benno protested, a conflicted expression on his face, but his refusal was weaker than before. Sensing that, Bierce looked at me and pleaded desperately.

“Could you dig into him a little more for me, girl?”

“...I don’t mind helping to convince Benno, but only if you help me develop colored ink.”

“Colored ink? What’re you talking about?”

While Bierce blinked in confusion, the girl next to him shot up a hand. “I’ll do it! That’s why I’m here!”

“Umm... Sorry, but can I ask your name?”

“It’s Heidi. She’s my daughter, and she’ll be running my workshop one day. She loves making ink and discovering new things. She didn’t even calm down when she turned twenty. She and her husband are the ones making the ink you invented for plant paper.”

Even though she only looked about fifteen at a glance, she was actually over twenty and already married.

Wowee.

“Your ink’s so new and fresh, it really rocked my world. Lookin’ forward to working with you.”

“My name is Myne. I think we will do great things together.”

“Right now, nobody’s buying plant paper ink except your workshop. Buy lots and use lots, okay?”

The only real problem with normal ink was that it damaged the plant paper a little too much—it wasn’t useless or anything, which meant that even if more people started buying the somewhat cheaper plant paper, most would probably

just keep using the ink they were used to. There was no need for them to go out of their way to buy separate ink. And most importantly, what I taught the Ink Guild to make was highly sticky ink specifically made for printing; it was hard to imagine anyone else but me would want any right now.

“I guess I’ll have to hurry up with making my second picture book, then.”

“Yep. And by the way, I thought this while making the plant paper ink, but it definitely seems like you could make different colored ink the same way.”

Heidi had figured out that you could make colored ink, but wasn’t able to experiment with it herself. This was because her dad, Bierce, had told her that the Gilberta Company had signed an expensive magic contract to transfer rights to the black ink, and that they might have already done the same with colored ink. But she had wanted to make colored ink so badly that she convinced him to go talk to Benno to discuss whether or not they could experiment. Benno barely knew anything about making ink, which is how this meeting with me came to be.

“It is indeed possible to make colored ink. Please, feel free to make as much as you want.”

“Well, it’s also, like... what materials should I use? I came here hoping you’d have some ideas for me. I got a lot of materials used for paints and dyes together, but which would be good for ink?” Heidi asked, her gray eyes gleaming as she looked straight at me.

I started to open my mouth to answer, but Benno clamped a hand on my shoulder. “Myne. You get how this works by now, right?” His eyes were saying it loud and clear: Don’t talk for free.

I shut my mouth and gave Benno a nod before turning back to look at Heidi. “I will take one tenth of all profits from the colored ink as payment for my information.”

“That’s way too much! It’ll cost us a ton of money to develop the stuff before we can even start selling it!” Heidi exclaimed, almost shrieking. She had a very good idea how much research and development would cost.

I tilted my head in thought. “I will take one tenth of the profits from the

colored ink, but will cover half of the research and development cost.”

“Okay! You’ve got a deal!” Heidi thrust out a hand on the spot, her face shining. Negotiations complete.

But when I went to shake her hand, Benno grabbed onto my head just as Bierce smacked a hand onto Heidi’s. “That’s not for you two to decide!”

Heidi and I both looked at our respective guardians, hands on our heads.

“...But why not? Wasn’t that a fair deal?”

“Not at all. You were being stupidly generous. If you’re gonna be giving out information, you only need to cover a quarter of the development fees at most.”

“Yeah, that’s more reasonable.” Bierce nodded in agreement to Benno’s correction.

The two of them started working out the details, but I just wanted to start talking to Heidi about colored ink already. She seemed to be thinking the same thing, judging by the hopeful look she was giving me as she wriggled in place.

“Ma’am, want to come to my workshop? I’ve got all the materials I could think of laid out for you. Though Dad got real mad at me about that.”

“That sounds absolutely wonderful! Of course I would like to come!”

I could already tell that Heidi and I would be getting along just fine. We both stood up at the same time, but were grabbed and forced back down by our respective guardians.

“We’re not done talking yet!”

“Hold your horses, idiot!”

Our guardians were completely synchronized.

Benno let out a heavy sigh while still holding me down. “...Alright. I’ll take care of selling the ink for now. But all we’ll have a monopoly over is the plant paper ink the Myne Workshop uses. That includes the colored ink. Anything else is up for grabs by anyone who comes knocking to join the market. Give the guildmaster more targets to focus on.”

“Alright. Thanks, this is a big help.”

Benno and Bierce’s exhausting back-and-forth finally concluded, with sellers for the ink being decided upon.

“Can I go to the workshop now?”

“Let’s get to work on that ink.”

Heidi and I stood up, prompting Benno to call Lutz. He placed a hand on his shoulder. “Keep a close eye on them, Lutz. Seems like we’ve got two Mynes on our hands now.”

“Master Benno, that’s too much even for me. I’ve got my hands full with just one Myne.”

An extremely uneasy expression washed over Benno’s face, and I waved goodbye with a big smile as we headed off for the ink workshop. But it wasn’t long before Heidi ran out of patience with my walking speed and just sprinted ahead on her own, saying that she would get things ready for us. Bierce paled and apologized on her behalf, but I didn’t mind. It wasn’t anything to get upset about.

“So, Lutz. What do you think about Heidi? I think she’s funny and hard working, but kinda weird.”

“...You’re one to talk.”

The workshop Bierce took us to looked like a chemistry lab at school rather than a place to make ink; there was a ton of equipment lying around, with craftsmen using scales to carefully measure out materials that would be used to make gallnut ink. The plant paper ink was being made off in one corner. There were several jars packed full of the finished ink, which was where I found Heidi getting yelled at by a twenty-something-year-old guy. It sounded like his complaints could be summarized as, “Finish your work before playing around.”

“Bierce, is Heidi busy?”

“...Nah, that’s nothing to be concerned about. Hey, Josef! Don’t worry about Heidi right now. She’s got a customer to deal with today,” Bierce yelled over the din of the workshop. Heidi turned around with a beaming smile, whereas the

man named Josef blinked in stunned surprise.

“Boss, are you insane?! You’re letting Heidi deal with a customer?”

“This here is an important patron who wants colored ink and is willing to pay a quarter of the development cost for it. We don’t need to stop Heidi’s research today. Just watch and make sure she doesn’t do anything rude.”

Their conversation was more than enough for me to infer how Heidi was normally treated here.

“Lady Myne, this is Josef. He’s Heidi’s husband and the de facto successor of the workshop. Hope you and him get along nice enough.”

“I’m Myne, the forewoman of the Myne Workshop. I have come to buy the plant paper ink you’ve made and also help develop new, colored ink,” I said, which made Josef give a sigh of relief. It seemed the lack of buyers for the plant paper ink had been making him nervous.

“This is how much we’ve made so far.”

“Please bring it to our store by the end of tomorrow,” said Lutz. He was buying the ink as a leherl from the Gilberta Company to then sell to the Myne Workshop later. It seemed tedious and unnecessary, but was apparently an important process.

I left the merchant business to Lutz and instead looked around the workshop. Damuel and Gil had come with us and were peering around too, intrigued by what life was like in the lower city.

“Lady Myne, over here, over here.”

I went over to where Heidi was beckoning me and saw small amounts of a wide range of materials placed on a table. They had all been turned into powder already, which made it impossible to tell what was what. There was also a variety of different oils.

“Heidi, what kinds of oils are these?”

“I got every kind I could. Just linseed oil might not be enough, right?”

“Indeed. I was thinking the same thing.”

An essential component of ink was drying oil, but the only thing like that in the city that I knew of was linseed oil—something I had been able to guess existed when I saw hemp and linen in this world, which were made from the plants that grew from the seeds that were turned into oil. But there wasn't much linseed oil here, and it was all expensive. I had just been thinking that I wanted to search for oil that could be used in its place, and now would be a good opportunity to learn more about the different kinds of oil in this world.

"Some oils harden when exposed to air and some don't, but it's the ones that harden that are good for making ink," I said. "They're called drying oils."

"Mm, there's not much oil like that other than linseed oil. Just mische, pedgen, eise, and turm oil," Heidi said, grabbing the respective jars of oil from the lined-up row. I hurriedly got out my diptych and wrote down the names of the flowers and nuts she had listed.

"The ink I'm familiar with is mostly made from grinding minerals into a powder and then mixing it with oil. Let's see... This yellow clay should make an ink colored something between yellow and brown."

"Okay, let's give it a shot. Josef, lend us a hand." Heidi called Josef over and got right to work mixing the oil and clay on top of a granite slab.

"...Huh? It's not turning brown!"

"B-But why?"

Yellow clay mixed with oil should have made a brownish-yellow color. It wouldn't make sense for it to turn into any other color, and yet the mixture had turned a bright sky blue before my very eyes. I stared at it, in a daze.

"L-Let's try using another kind of oil."

Josef and Heidi tried mixing the clay with the other oils, one by one. First mische, then pedgen, eise, and finally turm. Eise was the only kind that produced the yellow color I was expecting, while the others turned red and greenish-blue, completely outside of my expectations. All we could do was blink in surprise as we stared at the five different colors on the slab.

"This just doesn't make sense, right?"

“Right. I never would have guessed the kind of oil we used would change the ink’s color. It’s surprising, but I guess we should be glad that we were able to make so many different colors using just a single kind of material?”

Josef, who was now rolling his tired shoulders to stretch his muscles, looked at me with an exhausted expression. “You’re more optimistic than I expected.”

“Well, all I want is colored ink, so I’m happy as long as it doesn’t turn transparent.”

I went ahead and wrote our results on my diptych. Maybe there was a method to the madness.

Meanwhile, Lutz looked at the ink with a hand on his chin. “How’d this even happen? What’s going on here?”

“You’re curious too? It’s really weird, isn’t it? Don’t you just wanna figure it out, no matter what?!” exclaimed Heidi, eagerly clasping Lutz’s hands with a manic grin on her face. It seemed she was the type of girl who really, really wanted to figure out anything she didn’t understand.

I shut my diptych. “Heidi, it doesn’t matter why this is happening right now. What does matter is which colors we can make from combining these materials.”

“Whaaat?! Something mysterious is happening right in front of you, and you don’t even want to figure out what’s causing it?” Heidi’s gray eyes opened wide, and she looked at me with a mixture of surprise and betrayal.

Josef immediately reached out from the side to grab onto her head. “Quit it! This fine lady isn’t a weirdo like you!”

“‘Weirdo’? That’s so mean. I thought she and I would get along great.”

I sympathized with Heidi, but I wasn’t exactly in this to solve any scientific mysteries. I just wanted to make colored picture books for my cute little brother, Kamil. And by the way, while I wasn’t particularly invested in doing research myself, I welcomed any and all books that compiled the results of any research.

“I’m more interested in the result than the process that produces the result.

Eise gave us the color I wanted, and that's what matters. Let's try mixing that blue powder with the eise next. We may find some important connections and differences along the way." I pointed at the blue powder and Heidi gave a big nod.

"I can agree with you there. Let's get back to it."

Eise had given us the yellow color I wanted, but mixing it with the blue powder that looked like lapis lazuli produced a bright yellow for some reason. It would be perfect for painting a field of sunflowers, but yellow wasn't the color I was looking for. In the end, it was the linseed oil that gave us a lapis lazuli-esque blue.

"...This might be hard," I said, glaring at the results written on my diptych. The gap between my knowledge and the knowledge of this world was just too great. The huge number of materials and the five different kinds of oil seemed to make an endless number of possible colors. *This might be hard, indeed.*

Researching Color-Making

Rows of bottles containing colored ink were laid out in a small glass rainbow, and attached to each bottle was a tiny wooden board describing the combination of oil and materials that had formed the color. Josef was in the process of relocating them to a shallow wooden box.

We had stopped experimenting for the day since Josef's and Heidi's arms were tired from hours of mixing, lunchtime was approaching, and the only two diptychs we had on hand were completely full—not even borrowing Lutz's diptych after mine had run out of space had been enough to contain all of our data. I looked over both while thinking about the results.

“It's not great that the color is near impossible to predict.”

“But we've figured out some general trends, eh? And it's sooo nice that we have all the results labeled so clearly like this. I'm glad you were around and know how to write, Lady Myne! You're the best!” Heidi exclaimed, beaming as she looked over at my diptych. She could understand a few words and letters that were relevant to her job, but she was still basically illiterate. In the past, she'd had no way to record the results of her experiments, having to instead rely entirely on her memory.

“I think you being able to memorize such complicated test results is a lot more impressive, personally.”

“Sadly, Heidi only seems to have a good memory when it comes to her experiments. It's far from perfect,” Josef said with slumped shoulders.

Lutz looked at me and gave a teasing grin. “That goes for Myne too. She only puts in this much effort and dedication when books are involved.”

Lutz and Josef seemed to have bonded over this, and were patting each other's backs in a show of consolation.

It's nice to find people you can relate to. Each day gets a little more fun.

“Okay, I'll have these test results compiled by the day after tomorrow.”

“Thankee, thankee. I don’t know how to write, so that’s all up to you.”

Heidi and I shook hands and exchanged a smile before going our separate ways. I wanted to go straight home to start compiling our results, but Gil pulled on my sleeve while acting kind of hesitant.

“What’s wrong, Gil?”

“Sister Myne, I want a diptych too...” Gil murmured, his eyes lowered. That reminded me—I had said I’d make one for him once spring came since he had learned to read.

“Okay, let’s stop by Johann’s smithy to order a stylus for you. Then I can go home and compile the results.”

The ink workshop wasn’t too far from the smithy since both were in Craftsman’s Alley. Johann might not be happy to see us since we’d be visiting right before lunch break, but we headed for the smithy nonetheless.

“Good morning. Is Johann here?”

The foreman glanced away from the customer he was dealing with to look over at us. The second he saw me, he stifled a guffaw and forced out a “Heya there” before gesturing toward an empty seat.

“I’ll go get Johann for you,” he said. “Heeey, Gutenberg! Your patron’s here!”

“Pfff!” Lutz and Gil hurriedly covered their mouths to stop themselves from laughing. It seemed that “Gutenberg” had stuck as a nickname for Johann in the smithy.

“Foreman, I told you to stop calling me that!”

I thought “Gutenberg” was quite a respectable name, but Johann clearly didn’t like it too much. He came bursting out from the back, meeting the foreman with narrowed eyes and a big frown.

“Good morning, Johann.”

“Oh, Lady Myne. Welcome.”

“Sorry for coming right before lunch. Do you have time to take an order?”

“...I’m still not done with your last order,” Johann said with an uncomfortable

expression. He was still working on the additional letter types I had ordered, but that wasn't a huge deal since the High Priest already put a stop to movable type printing. Johann could take his time making a ton of them over the next couple of years.

"Please prioritize this order. I would like you to make a stylus for Gil, just like the ones I ordered previously."

"Absolutely!" Johann said, his face beaming. He even pumped a fist into the air. "It's been so long since I made anything but letter types... So, so long..." he murmured, an emotional tear dripping down his cheek.

...Honestly, I feel kinda bad now. Sorry, Johann.

Since I was his only patron, he had apparently been making nothing but letter type after letter type. And on top of that, not just the foreman, but now all of his coworkers made fun of him for his "Gutenberg" title.

Maybe I should pop in every now and again just to give him different things to do.

"I'll try to give you orders for things other than letter types soon." I needed an iron for the wax stencils, as well as a stylus and a file for the mimeograph. There were a lot of things I would want his help to make, but all of them were tools for printing.

"I'm very much looking forward to working on something other than letter types."

Johann's smile at getting the stylus order made me feel just a little guilty; no matter how I looked at it, he wasn't going to escape his fate as a Gutenberg.

Having ordered Gil's stylus, we left the smithy just as fourth bell rang to signify noon.

"You're going home, right, Myne?"

"Uh huh."

"I'm hungry and wanna get back to the store as soon as possible. Get on, let's hurry." Lutz crouched down for me to get on his back. Apparently he'd end up getting less food if he wasn't back soon.

Knowing that I would be dead weight and just slow him down otherwise, I climbed onto his back without protest. He stood up and dashed off in a half-run to the plaza where our well was.

“You stay inside and start compiling the test results after lunch. I’ve gotta go check up on the Myne Workshop and give Master Benno a report on all this. Don’t go outside, okay?” Lutz set me down in the plaza and put his diptych into my hands before immediately running off toward the Gilberta Company. It looked like he really was worried about his lunch.

After seeing him off, I turned to look at Damuel and Gil, who were both blinking in surprise. “Sir Damuel, Gil, thank you for accompanying me. You may both return to the temple, since I won’t be going outside any more today.”

“Alright. You’ll want to come to the temple tomorrow, I take it?”

“Yes. I would really like to go to the ink workshop, but Rosina would be very unhappy if I missed too much harspiel practice.”

I put Lutz’s diptych into my tote basket and climbed the stairs home all alone. “I’m home,” I whispered while quietly opening the door, though there was no escaping the creaking of the rusty hinges.

“Welcome home, Myne. You’re back early,” Mom said after I slid inside. She was probably preparing lunch, given that she was standing in front of the hearth.

“Mom, how’s Kamil? Is he sleeping? Did I wake him up?” I asked, glancing over at the bedroom.

“Don’t worry, he’s fine,” Mom replied with a small smile and nod.

I snuck into the bedroom to have a look at Kamil’s face, then put my stuff down and washed my hands before eating lunch with Mom. We were only halfway through when Kamil started to cry in his tiny voice. Mom hurriedly finished her food and sped over to him.

“Sorry, Myne, but could you clean up for me?”

I cleared away our dishes before starting to copy the results of today’s experiments from the diptychs onto my notepad made of failed paper. The

seemingly nonsensical results began to take a more sensible form once I had them all lined up together. Linseed oil tended to make blue colors, mische green colors, pedgen red colors, and eise yellow colors. Turm would make seemingly random colors, but they all had pastel tones.

“Hmm. There are some exceptions to these rules, but I think I’ve gotten a grasp on how they work.”

We could make a surprisingly wide range of colors with these combinations. All it took was listing what made which oils change to which color.

“You look like you’re thinking hard, Myne. What are you working on?” Mom asked when she returned from the bedroom with Kamil, who was wrapped in what resembled a long baby sling. His eyes were wide open, maybe because he just filled himself up on milk.

“I’m planning a picture book for Kamil. It’s going to need pretty, colored ink, which I’m trying to make now.”

“You’re making it from scratch? That sounds like it’ll take a while.”

“It will, I think. How’s Kamil today?” I asked while stroking his head. He stared at my face without blinking. I couldn’t compare to Delia’s overwhelming big sister power, but Kamil not crying over my presence was good enough for me.

“Kamil, Kamil. It’s me, Myne, your big sister.”

I spent some time playing with Kamil, until eventually his eyes began to droop again. I watched Mom take him back to bed, then looked back at the list I had made.

“Oh?” While looking through the oil names, I realized that the oh-so-familiar parue oil wasn’t included. “It might be worth experimenting with that, too. I wonder what would happen? Maybe I should bring some to the workshop. And also, we need to test to see whether the ink we’ve made changes color when put on paper, not to mention whether it lasts over time. Experimenting with layering colors will be important too.” I wrote down everything I wanted to investigate that I could think of. These were things I would have to ask Heidi about next time I saw her.

The next day, I went to the temple for my daily harspiel practice, then helped

the High Priest. In the afternoon, I spent time with Delia, who was always bored and listless while Dirk was in the orphanage. I had Lutz get some paper and brushes from the workshop; tomorrow we would be bringing them to the ink workshop to test ink on.

And so the next day arrived. Gil, Damuel, Lutz, and I headed to the ink workshop with the paper, brushes, and the rest of our parue oil from the winter. Heidi was pacing in front of the workshop. It wasn't hard to imagine that she had been dying waiting for us. The second she saw us, her face lit up and she gave a big wave.

"Morning, Lady Myne. It's so good to see you!"

"Morning, Heidi. Here's the chart of compiled data." I showed her the research I had compiled as soon as we were in the workshop. She peered at it with excitement, but then slumped over sadly.

"I can tell what some of the stuff is, but I can't read most of this."

"Also, I had a thought while compiling this..." I began listing out all of the things I wanted to try, which earned me a big, eager nod from Heidi.

"I didn't include any parue oil since you can only harvest them in the winter. This may make for some interesting results. Let's try it out right away!"

Heidi and Josef began mixing various materials into the parue oil I had brought. She tried out red materials and he tried out blue ones; they mixed them, ground them, and stirred them a ton, but there were no weird changes. Both simply turned into the color of the material put into them.

"Both batches of parue oil turned into the colors we expected. That's incredible," I said, looking at the finished ink with wide eyes. I had seen so many weird changes of color that simple, logical results were enough to impress me.

Heidi let out an impressed whistle at the finished ink. "The colors are real vibrant too. If only we could get parues outside of winter, huh?"

Heidi was right. Parue oil couldn't be used liberally since parues could only be gathered on sunny winter days. The oil was great, but sadly not suited for high volume production.

While Heidi and I were sadly consoling each other, Josef was already preparing for the next experiment. “Let’s try getting the ink we’ve made on paper, yeah?”

Heidi helped Josef bring out all of the ink we had made the other day. I leaned over to Lutz as I watched them prepare.

“Hey, Lutz. Do you think we could make paper out of parue trees?” I asked, full of hope after seeing how well the parue oil worked for this. Trombes were feyplants and they made good paper, so maybe parue trees would make for good material too.

“Nah, that’ll never work. Those trees just melt and vanish when fire touches them. They’d disappear if you tried boiling their wood, and there’s no way we could peel their bark.”

“...Are parue trees really that weird?” Having never gone to the forest during the winter, I had yet to see a parue tree. I’d heard about how they’re strange, beautiful, and only appear on sunny winter mornings, but other than that I really didn’t know anything about them.

“Lady Myne, everything’s ready.”

At Heidi’s call, I beckoned Gil over so that he could test the ink on the paper using his brush. I had brought several sheets of poorly made volrin and trombe that we wouldn’t miss. We weren’t going to be making picture books out of trombe paper, but it was still worth seeing how it handled the ink.

“...Oof.”

Unsurprisingly, the ink even changed color depending on the type of paper it was put on. The colors stayed pretty much the same on the trombe paper, but ended up more dull on the volrin paper, though it wasn’t really noticeable unless you compared the two side by side.

It’s fine, I tried telling myself. But as time passed and the ink dried, the colors just kept getting more and more dull.

“I think we’ll need to make other kinds of paper and experiment with them too.” I could have wept as I compared the colors on the trombe and volrin paper. Lutz, on the other hand, just gave a light shrug.

“Volrin is the only kind of paper we’re gonna be using for a while, so why not just make colors that look good on that?”

He was right. The Myne Workshop was only making trombe paper and volrin paper at the moment. If we wanted to make the picture books any time soon, we’d need to focus on making colors that were suited to volrin paper.

“This red color was really pretty before, but now that it’s on paper and has dried, it’s more like a dark-blackish red. It would be good for drawing blood.”

“We don’t need a color that’s only gonna be good for that!” Lutz yelled.

I pursed my lips. Maybe we *would* need an ink that’s only good for blood. It wasn’t uncommon for religious myths to get bloody.

“...This stuff’s real tricky,” Heidi murmured as she glared at the changed ink, her arms crossed. “I think I understand why art workshops keep their paint recipes secret.” It really wasn’t easy to make colored ink independently.

According to Benno, paint production wasn’t bound by any magic contracts, so any workshop could make it as they pleased, but the production methods themselves were kept secret by the workshops and none were on sale in the lower city. The workshops making paint for art-loving nobles delivered their goods directly—I knew this from Rosina, who had been the attendant of one such art-loving shrine maiden. You couldn’t get certain colors anywhere except from the workshop that made them, so apparently Christine had favored a number of workshops at once.

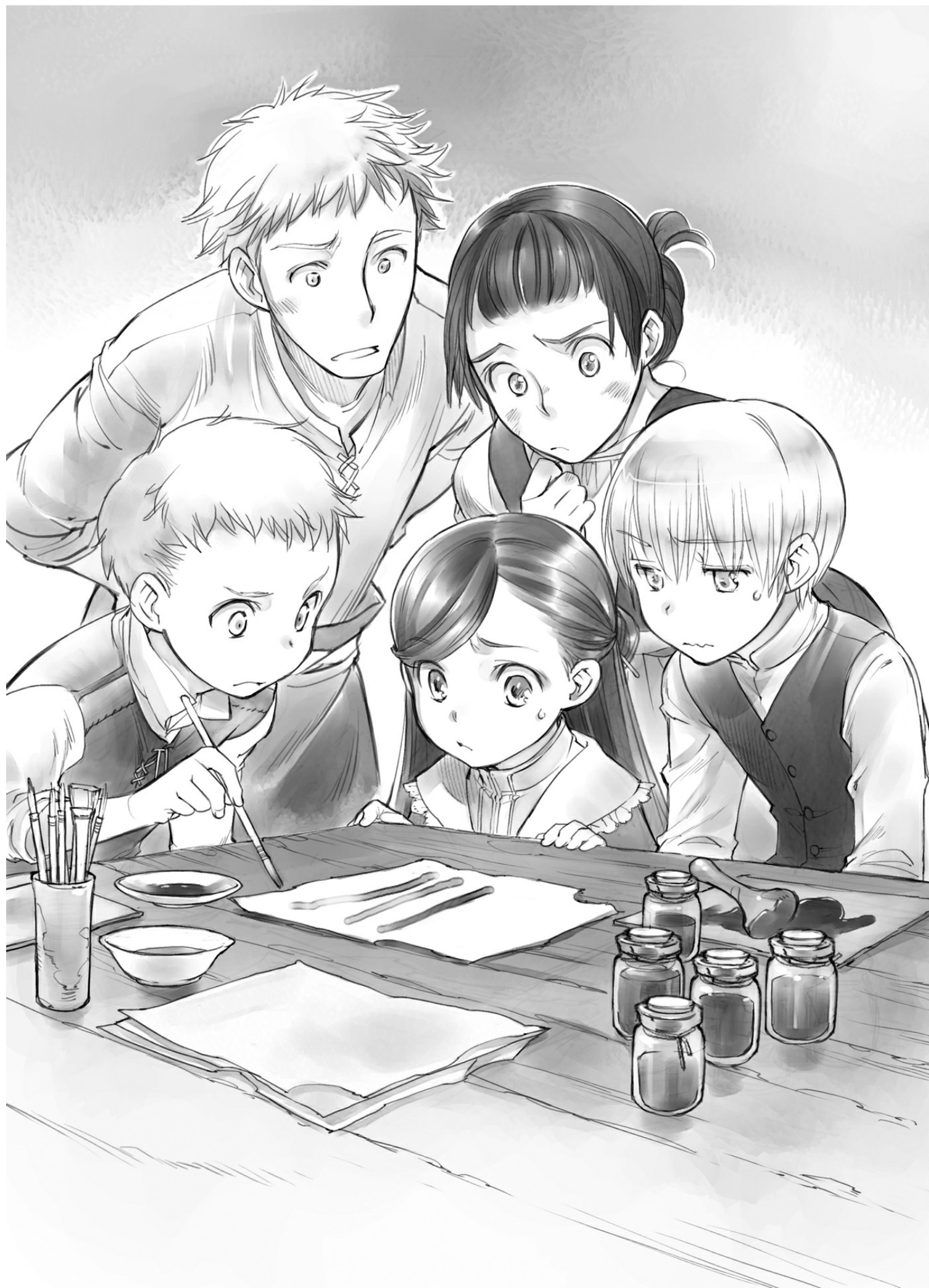
“Lady Myne, let’s figure out why it’s changing colors.”

“Like I said, the results are the important thing here.” I could appreciate her dedication to discovery, but my goal was to make picture books for Kamil; I didn’t have the time to waste on superfluous research. I wanted usable colored ink as soon as possible.

“Let’s try layering the colors next. Gil, would you?”

“As you wish, Sister Myne.” Gil drew a blue line across the colors we had already put on the paper, and the overlapping parts darkened significantly. It wasn’t pitch-black, more of a really dark version of the mixed colors. Not a single one of the combinations could be described as bright or vivid. If we had a

“Danger: Do Not Mix” sign on hand, this would be exactly the right time for it.



“...What’re we gonna do?” Gil asked, holding up the sheet of discolored paper. The result was so unexpected that we were all at a loss for words. All we could do was stare in silence at the dark colors.

Josef eventually broke the silence. “Guess we should just stick to separate colors for these,” he said with a shake of his head.

“But I’m pretty sure you gotta mix colors to paint things properly. Seems like there are still a lot of secrets behind the paint that art workshops use.” Heidi was right. If our ink turned black when mixed with other colors, we wouldn’t be able to draw anything like the paintings in the temple’s noble section. The paint used in this world definitely had a secret to it that I didn’t know about.

“Let’s stop for today. No matter how many colors we make, it won’t matter if they change over time and turn black when mixed.”

Maybe there’s some way we can sneak the secret to making paint out of an art workshop, I thought, slumping my shoulders in despair over the ink-making being stalled. The fact that we hadn’t made any usable colored ink meant we had failed.

I returned home with my head hung low, and reported the day’s results to Tuuli as I helped her make dinner.

“...Which means the colored ink doesn’t work. I don’t know what to do about it.”

“Mhm, you definitely don’t want mixed colors to turn black.”

“Right. It’s a big problem. It just wouldn’t be usable for printing, no matter how hard I tried.” I stirred the pot of soup while pursing my lips in a pout.

Mom, who was watching us cook while breastfeeding Kamil, put a hand on her cheek in confusion. “You’re not using a fixing agent when putting the ink on paper?”

“...What’s a fixing agent?” I had read about fixing agents for photos and art back in my Urano days, but had no idea what kind of fixing agents were used here.

Seeing my confusion, Mom returned her gaze to Kamil and continued. “A

fixing agent is a liquid used to stabilize colors. We use them when dyeing to stop the color from fading over time.”

“Mom, could I ask for specifics? How exactly do you make a fixing agent?” I looked at Mom with gleaming eyes, but she just furrowed her brow in concern.

“Is this something I should be telling you?”

“I’ll check to see whether it’s bound by any magic contracts later.”

“...Well, I suppose it won’t be a problem then. I trust you to make sure it’s safe for you to make,” Mom said with a somewhat uneasy tone before continuing.

You could apparently make the base of a fixing agent by putting the sap of a tree called a gnade into the stem of a flower called heirein, then boiling it until it went all gooey. When actually using it, you would want to dissolve it with about twenty times as much boiling water.

“Be careful. I’m sure there’ll be differences between using it on cloth and paper.”

“Thanks, Mom. I’ll give it a shot.”

Now that I knew about fixing agents, I immediately asked Lutz to get the necessary materials for me. He seemed to have not known about fixing agents either, judging by how his eyes widened in surprise.

“I didn’t know there was something like that. We might’ve never figured it out if Mrs. Effa didn’t work in a dye workshop.”

“Uh huh. I want to get the materials together and try making it right away, especially since Mom went out of her way to teach me how to make it.” I started humming in excitement at our new discovery, but both Lutz and Gil stopped me.

“You should just teach us how to make it.”

“Yeah, we’ll make it. You shouldn’t do it yourself, Sister Myne.”

If we were going to make it in the Myne Workshop, then I wasn’t allowed to do any work. I pursed my lips at being the only one left out, but no one backed me up.

I had Benno look up the magic contracts through the Merchant's Guild and search for materials, setting the stage for us to start making a fixing agent. When the time finally came, both Lutz and Gil were bouncing with excitement over the new challenge. I handed them both boards with detailed instructions on them, and that was that. My job was done.

I didn't like being left out, so after harspiel practice with Rosina, I told her about the colored ink in order to vent my lonely frustration.

"And now Lutz and Gil are making the fixing agent without me as we speak. Do you not think that is just cruel?"

But Rosina was less sympathetic for my plight and more just surprised that I didn't know about fixing agents. "Oh, you did not know about fixing agents, Sister Myne?" she asked, her eyes wide. "They are essential for drawing. Without them, no colored art could be done at all, really."

In a shocking twist, the temple also had someone who knew about fixing agents. Apparently they were essential for art. But since Rosina had only ever used finished fixing agents, she didn't know how to make them.

"...Do you by chance not know how to use fixing agents either, Sister Myne?"

"I do not. May I ask you to teach me?" Mom only knew how to use it for colored dye. I would need to know how to use it for art when making the colored picture books.

Rosina gave a refined giggle at the immediateness of my request. "You must put the fixing agent on the paper ahead of time and allow it to dry. That way, there will be no discoloration even when layering different colors of paint. Sister Myne, you seem to know a shocking amount about everything, but I see there are some simple things that escape your grasp."

"I have simply never taken the time to draw with paint or ink before."

"Indeed," Rosina murmured before clapping her hands together and smiling. "In that case, would it not be wise to have Wilma teach you how to draw once you have finished the fixing agent and colored ink? Art is an important cornerstone for any woman of culture to learn."

"I shall think about it." I gave an ambiguous reply, but already had a clear

response on the inside. *No thanks, I don't want to lose any more free time than I have already.*

That said, some part of my heart told me that it might be smart for me to learn it now, since in two years' time I would be a noble's adopted daughter whether I liked it or not.

Using the fixing agent production process I had learned from Mom and applying it as taught by Rosina resulted in us being able to layer multiple colors without them becoming black or discolored. The colored ink was complete.

Challenging Wax Stencils

We had finished something that at least resembled proper colored ink. It required us to use a fixing agent or else the ink would turn black when we layered the colors on top of paper, and they would still turn black when mixed together on the palette, but still—progress was progress.

“Aah, we sure finished that in no time...” Heidi murmured, sounding like a kid who had just had their toy taken away from them. Personally, I was just relieved to have finished the colored ink, but Heidi seemed disappointed that we hadn’t figured out what made the colors change like that.

Josef poked her cheek, an exasperated look on his face. “Now that the ink’s done, she’s not gonna be paying for the research anymore. Playtime’s over.”

“Well, considering how much of a success this was, I don’t mind paying a bit more if you want to continue your research.”

My offer made Heidi beam a full-faced grin, and Josef spun around to look at me in complete disbelief.

“I think further research will be important if we want to make more vibrant colors and just generally increase the number of colors at our disposal. I had prioritized just finishing some form of color ink due to time constraints, but I don’t mind you continuing your research.” And since I didn’t feel like investigating why the colors changed myself, I was more than glad to let someone else do the job for me.

“Lady Myne, you’re the best!”

“Please, you’re spoiling her!”

“Heidi, Josef—as far as I am concerned, you are both now Gutenbergs.” I grinned, having found more Gutenberg allies to propel my dreams forward. Ink was essential to the development of printing and now I had it.

Lutz cradled his head, mumbling something about there being more of them now, while Heidi and Josef just blinked in confusion.

“Guten... huh? We’re a what?”

“Gutenberg. The name of a heroic—nay, godlike—being whose legendary accomplishments changed the history of books. As it stands, Johann is the Gutenberg of metal letter types, Benno is the Gutenberg of plant paper, and Lutz is the Gutenberg of selling books. There’s also Ingo who helped make the printing press, and now you two are the Gutenbergs of making ink. It is only natural that I would fund the Gutenbergs who are making my dreams of reading a reality.” I proudly puffed out my chest as I gave my explanation, but Josef’s baffled expression remained.

Heidi, on the other hand, was jumping for joy. “We’re Gutenbergs, Josef! She has work for us! She’ll fund us! She’ll let me do research! Yahoooo!”

We had already made colored ink; I had no objections to Heidi continuing to research it on her own time. “I’m sure that knowing why the ink changes color will prove useful in the future, so please, keep up the good work.”

“You can count on us!” Heidi exclaimed.

“*However*, your highest priority should be making the ink. If you don’t finish an order before the due date, I’ll cut off your funding without a second thought.”

“Eek!”

“You’re the kind of person who loses sight of their surroundings when they get absorbed in their research. I need to make it clear what your priorities should be, and lay out a punishment for when you fail to stay on track,” I said to Heidi as firmly as I could.

“Birds of a feather sure know how to clip each other’s wings, huh? Looks like you know exactly how to keep her under control,” Lutz said with a chuckle, while Josef plopped a hand over his own mouth to hold back his laughter. He seemed like he would be able to keep Heidi in check.

“Well, that takes care of colored ink. I think I want to start working on the wax stencil next.”

The next thing I needed to get ready was the wax stencil, an essential part of

mimeograph printing. We would first need to make thin wax paper, but then we would be able to make stencils by writing out what we wanted to print using a metal stylus, which would be much faster and easier than cutting out the text parts like we would for normal stencils or setting up rows of letter types. This would also allow us to print more detailed art, which would let Wilma's work shine even brighter.

"The stencils we're using now aren't any good?"

"It's not that they aren't good at all—they can make picture books, after all. But with wax stencils, we'll have a wider range of expression available to us. It's way easier to just write on wax paper using a metal stylus than it is to cut each individual letter out of normal paper, and it'll let us use more precise lines."

To make wax stencils, we first needed paper thin enough that one could see through it. But while Lutz and I had spent the past two and half years making paper, those in the orphanage didn't even have a year of experience. The thick paper we used for picture books wasn't so hard to make, but getting thin paper of equal size was a little rough. They were already trying in the Myne Workshop, but were failing a lot more than they succeeded. Apparently the paper kept ripping when they were taking it out of the frame or putting it onto a board to dry.

"This would be a lot easier if we could just use trombe wood." Lutz crossed his arms and frowned. Trombe wood fibers were thinner and longer than volrin fibers, which made it easier to swish them into an equally thin sheet of paper. But trombe wood was too rare and valuable for us to make into stencils.

"It'll end up really pricey if we can't make these out of volrin."

"...Yeah."

All I could do was leave Lutz and Gil to keep trying to improve the paper. As the workshop continued to make paper for the picture books, they gathered the people with the most dexterous hands and set them to work making thin paper. Days passed as everyone worked hard to see what could improve their success rate, until one day Lutz came to my chambers after lunch.

"Myne, a message from Master Benno. Sounds like he got in contact with a wax workshop. They're free if you're available tomorrow afternoon."

“Really? Perfect. Now Gil can have his own diptych.”

That night, I asked Dad to make a diptych the same size as Lutz’s for Gil. All it needed now was some wax inside. My own diptych was running low on wax, with most of what was remaining having hardened to an inconvenient degree. This was a good opportunity to fill mine up as well, so I went ahead and scraped the remaining wax out.

“Good morning, Benno.”

“Heya. Let’s get going.” Benno hefted me up on the spot and started walking. Over his shoulder I could see Lutz and Gil racing to keep up with him, Gil hugging the diptych frame I had given him close to his chest.

Damuel faltered for a second at seeing Benno roughly pick me up out of nowhere, but it didn’t take long for him to realize that I never would have been able to keep up with Benno’s strides. He followed after us, trying to match Benno’s pace.

“Benno, if I had a method for making wax not smell, how much could I sell that for?”

I had to have a quick business discussion with Benno before we reached the workshop. I didn’t want him yelling at me for being out of control or doing things I shouldn’t have later.

“It’s better to sell that kind of info to the whole guild like we did with the ink production process. A single workshop doesn’t have the funds to make a deal like that.”

“Oh, I see.” It seemed a lot of money was involved in these kinds of deals; I would likely end up funding the research, development, and refinement that each of my Gutenbergs needed to perform.

I began thinking about how the negotiations would go when Benno interrupted me in a low voice. “I’ll handle the negotiations for this later. Don’t put yourself front and center here. They might have someone like Wolf in their guild.”

“...Okay.” I let Benno take care of the negotiations for the salting-out method.

We could talk later about our cut of the profits and how the negotiations would go down.

“If we’re putting off negotiations, is there any point in us even going to the wax workshop today?”

“I want to fill my and Gil’s diptychs. Also, I want to buy different kinds of wax.”

“Just buy?” Benno asked, and I nodded. I wanted to first see if we could make wax stencils without needing to improve the wax. It would be a stroke of luck if we could. And if we couldn’t, only then would I have to try to improve the wax.

“I hope we can make wax stencils using just normal wax, but if we can’t, I’ll try to get the wax workshop’s help improving the wax. I would want them to add resin similar to (pine) resin to make it a little stickier.”

Wax used for mimeograph wax stencils had pine resin or paraffin mixed into it, but since they definitely didn’t have any paraffin made from crude petroleum here, I wasn’t sure how far that knowledge would take me here. Given the strange coloration that we had seen with the colored ink, it was more than likely that weird stuff would happen to the wax as well, so I really wanted the help of a professional.

“Hmm. Alright, we’re just buying stuff today. We only need to get involved if you fail at whatever it is you’re doing, right?”

“Right.”

Benno entered the wax workshop with me in tow. The heat inside was oppressive, and the stench of what seemed like animal fat was so thick that it made me want to hold my nose.

The foreman came to see us right away since Benno had sent word of our arrival ahead of time.

“Good to see you, Benno. What business brings you here today?”

“Could you pour your cheapest wax into these?” I asked, holding out my and Gil’s diptychs. The foreman nodded and did so right away, remembering me from last time.

Gil stared at the clear wax eagerly. He hadn't touched it yet since we had told him to wait until the wax had hardened, but he was grinning with excitement anyway. Every now and again he would blow onto it, trying to speed up the cooling process. It was a little cute.

"Gil, if you do that, the wax may have an uneven surface when it hardens," I said with a smile. Gil jerked and looked in my direction.

"Yeah, she's definitely right," Lutz added. "She poked hers a lot while it was hardening and it ended up pretty bumpy."

"Lutz, shut up!" I glared at him for spilling my secrets for no reason, and Gil stepped away from his diptych while laughing a little. Apparently he didn't want to repeat my mistake.

"Hey, Benno. There's gotta be something else, right? You wouldn't've contacted us if all you needed was this," the foreman said, walking over to Benno after putting away his tools.

Benno nodded. "Yeah. I want a small box of every kind of wax you sell here."

"E-Every kind? You're not after candles like usual?"

"Yeah, and don't mix 'em up. We want your wax, not your candles."

Benno's order left the foreman dumbfounded. The owner of a major store like the Gilberta Company, who usually only came to get a specific number of candles of a particular size, was suddenly asking for every kind of wax he sold—and not even as candles. He never could have predicted that.

"What in the world do you need it for?"

"Now that, I can't tell you yet." Benno grinned, and the foreman put a hand on his cheek in thought. He knew Benno had been making new product after new product, and it was clear that he was wondering whether he was bearing witness to the next new invention.

"Alright. I'll have 'em to your store by tomorrow."

"Could I have one or two boxes of some wax you have on hand?"

"Yeah, I can get those no problem." The foreman went into the busy workplace to speak to the workers. Then, once he returned, we left the

workshop with two boxes of wax in hand.

“There. You can start working now, yeah?”

“Yep. Thanks, Benno.”

After returning to the Gilberta Company, I tapped cards with Benno to pay for the wax. I then wrote down the salting-out process on paper and worked out a price for him negotiating on my behalf. With that done, Benno would work things out with the wax workshop for me.

“Okay, let’s start experimenting as soon as we get back to the workshop,” I said, handing Gil the boxes of wax. Lutz gave a worried frown and grabbed my shoulders to stop me.

“Myne, hold on a second. What’re you doing? What’s the plan? You haven’t given us half of the explanation we need. Get us up to speed, *then* go back to the temple.”

Since I couldn’t do any work at the temple, it was necessary that I give my explanation first. My plan had been to do it in my director’s chambers, but it would probably be easier to keep the information under wraps by talking it over at the Gilberta Company.

I nodded. “You know the thin paper we made, right? We’re going to thinly apply wax to it. We’ll shave the wax down, sprinkle it onto the paper, and then use a (clothing iron) on it. That’s it! Simple, right?”

“Myne, what’s that and where can we get one?” Lutz gave a little frown at my simple explanation of how to make wax-covered paper. It seemed that the phrase “clothing iron” didn’t get carried over.

I tried to explain what it was while searching my memory. “U-Umm... It’s a piece of metal with a flat bottom that gets really hot and straightens out the wrinkles on cloth. Does that ring any bells? I would think they exist in clothing workshops or the homes of rich people.” Considering how smooth my robes had been when Corinna made them, I was pretty sure she had one.

Benno spoke up from the side. “Yeah, Corinna’s workshop has an iron. You need one?”

According to Benno, rich people and clothing workshops had wide pot-like things that they filled with charcoal to heat up. It resembled a charcoal iron from the past. My family naturally didn't own one since we just wore secondhand clothes, and Lutz didn't know about them for the same reason.

"Benno, do you sell irons in the Gilberta Company?"

"Nah, you gotta order those from a smithy. Not everyone needs to use them, and you don't tend to need more than one anyway. Gotta say, though... irons make a real mess if someone sucks at using them. Are you sure you can handle one?" Apparently, the pot-like irons would spill ashes and dirty up the surrounding area if you weren't careful. I would have preferred a simple-to-use electric iron, but that was a bit beyond my capabilities to make.

"For now, I'll try to improve the shape and order one from Johann." It seemed that an iron would be out of my reach for a bit.

I fell into thought. Lutz did the same, crossing his arms while mulling things over.

"We've got the motivation and knowledge, but not the tools. This sure sounds familiar. Myne, think about this some more—do we really have everything else we need?" Lutz asked, remembering how much he had struggled when we didn't have the proper tools for paper-making. I put a hand on my cheek and tried to remember the exact process for making simple wax paper.

"Umm... You cut the wax down into small pieces, then sprinkle it on top of the paper. This should be easy since we can just shave it down using a tea strainer, which you can buy at general stores. Then we sprinkle the shaved wax on top of the paper, and..." I froze mid-sentence and paled, my mouth agape. Lutz was right. I had forgotten something else. I squatted on the ground, head cradled in my hands. "NOOO! We don't have (cooking sheets)!"

"Huh?! What?"

I was trying to make wax paper in the most simple way possible, but we didn't have cooking sheets. Naturally, I couldn't make those on my own—or at least, I didn't know how.

"...It's just not happening."

“Try and think of a solution before you go off and get depressed. Is there anything that could replace it?” Lutz asked.

I furrowed my brow in thought. Before cooking sheets were invented, people used aluminum foil and paraffin paper. Aluminum foil would get all wrinkled and prevent us from being able to make an even layer of wax, and if you considered paraffin paper as more or less paper that needed a coating of paraffin wax, it was basically the same thing we were trying to make in the first place.

“Umm, it’s something meant to stop the melted wax from getting everywhere, but maybe sticking normal paper in the way will work? I hope it will, but I don’t know. What do you think, Lutz?”

Back on Earth, I was pretty sure that a sheet of copy paper could be used to block any excess melted wax, which meant a sheet of normal paper should work too. *At least, I think it should. I want to believe.*

“Don’t ask me, I dunno about any of that stuff. Are there any other tools you’d need?”

“That should be everything for making the wax paper, but I’ll want a mimeograph stylus and a file so that I can test whether it would be usable as stencils.” Making wax paper was as simple as melting wax on top of paper and then letting it dry, and while there was a chance that the iron would get wax stuck on it or otherwise dirty up the area, it probably wouldn’t stop us from succeeding. The only issue was whether or not this wax paper would be suitable for making stencils as is.

“A mimeograph stylus and a file... Is Johann gonna make those?”

“Uh huh. Those are both in Johann’s jurisdiction.” I stood up and gave Lutz a big nod, which made Benno’s lips curve into a grin.

“My sympathies to the Gutenbergs you’re dragging around.”

“You’re a Gutenberg too, Benno. It’s not just Johann. Why are you talking like you’re not in the same boat?” I asked, which wiped the grin off of Benno’s face. He grabbed my head in one hand and spoke in a low, growling voice.

“Every single person you’ve called a Gutenberg is buried under a mountain of

work right now, struggling each day to keep their head above water. Don't you think there's something you should be saying to all these people you're dumping loads of work onto, day after day?"

"Huh? Um... Err..." I floundered, my eyes darting between Benno and Lutz, unable to think of what he wanted me to say. They both looked at me with the same harsh expression, waiting for me to answer. It was clear that I wasn't going to be getting any hints.

"Let us continue striving to spread books across the world together?"

"Wrong! Show us some appreciation!" Benno roared, grinding a fist against my head.

"Thank you! Thank you! I exist as I am today thanks to you and Lutz, Benno! I'll continue being a burden on you both, but thank you for sticking with me!" I yelled with teary eyes.

Benno made it sound like I should feel bad about giving all the Gutenbergs a lot of work, but I only had a limited amount of time I could spend with Kamil. I had no intention of slowing down on making picture books—if anything, I wanted to speed up even more.

Johann looked like he wanted work other than making letter types when I went to get Gil's stylus, so I gave him the blueprints I had written out for an iron, a mimeograph stylus, and a mimeograph file. When he learned that they were all tools for printing, he truly understood that he would forever hold the title of "Gutenberg," and before my eyes he wept tears of joy.

Delia's Progress

I had ordered the tools we needed to make wax stencils from Johann, but it would be some time before they were done. In the end, Wilma finished her art for the next picture book before the tools were ready. It was a story about Flutrane the Goddess of Water and her twelve subordinate goddesses, themed around spring.

“Hey, Lutz. Since it’ll be a while before the tools are ready, should we just start working on the next picture book?”

Wilma had been working on the art for these since before we had finished color ink, so the stencils had all been made under the assumption that the illustrations would be printed in black and white. As a result, we were planning to print this round of books in black and white.

If we were printing in black and white with plain stencils, we could print without needing to wait for the tools to be done. We still didn’t have much paper since we had only resumed production in spring, but we could always just buy some from the plant paper workshops Benno had made.

“I want to use the printing press since we finally have one ready, but—”

“But the High Priest said no. Give up on it and just get to cutting out the stencils.” Lutz shot me down immediately, so I simply sighed in defeat and got to cutting. It was a true shame; we had worked so hard to make metal types and a printing press, but it was all for naught.

“There’s a lot of stuff you can do before resorting to using the printing press you were specifically ordered not to use, right? You need to talk to Fran and the High Priest about the colored ink being done, and you should tell Wilma about it as soon as possible so that she can draw art with color for your next picture book. She’ll have to think about that and the printing method when planning her next illustrations.”

“You’re right. I haven’t had much time to properly sit down and talk with

Wilma since she's been so busy looking after Dirk. I'll try to go to the orphanage this afternoon to see her."

Lutz and I walked down the street while talking. A mother with a child on her back passed us, which made me realize something. I stuck my hand in my tote basket and took out a bag with two wooden tubes and some small stones in it. Dad had carved and hollowed out the tubes, and I had thoroughly cleaned the stones.

"Lutz, could you put the stones in these tubes, then glue the caps on?"

"...Sure, but why?" Lutz blinked in confusion at the stuff I had given him. Both tubes were identical, and once the stones were inside they'd function as rattles.

"They're baby toys—one for Kamil and one for Dirk. They make noise once you put the stones inside and shake them."

"Oh yeah, I know of something like that. They look kinda different, though."

"I'd like to color these and make them look cuter, but I don't want to put ink on something a baby will probably be putting in their mouth..."

A baby as few months old as Kamil and Dirk wouldn't be able to see colors that weren't vibrant enough, so I would want to cover them in bright red ink. But I felt resistance toward putting ink on something that would be going inside a baby's mouth. Ink made out of edible materials was always an option, but then I would have to worry about bacteria growing inside the ink.

"Well, they're not gonna last long either way, right? We can just use some of the ink we made out of edible materials back in the workshop. What else are we gonna use the colored ink we spent so much time on? It'll be a while before we can print with it anyway."

"Okay then. Could I ask you to do that, Lutz?"

"Sure. I'll get them to you this afternoon."

I said my goodbyes to Lutz in front of the workshop before heading to my chambers, where Rosina was waiting with the harspiel in hand.

"Good morning, Sister Myne."

I gave a bemused smile at Rosina's brimming enthusiasm, then looked at Delia

as she played with Dirk. “Delia, I would like to change clothes. Do you have a moment?”

“As you wish. Dirk, I will be back as soon as I’m finished. Wait just a moment.” Delia regretfully separated from Dirk, then speedily started changing me. She put my blue shrine maiden robes on as quickly as she could, tied the sash, then immediately returned to Dirk.

“Dirk, I’m back.” Delia spoke to Dirk with an absolutely shining expression that I had never seen on her before. She was head over heels for Dirk.

...What’s with that cute smile? I’ve never seen her smile like that before.

Delia already had a beautiful face, so seeing her smiling actually took my breath away. Her smile was so filled with love that I actually felt a bit jealous of Dirk.

“Sister Myne, Dirk seems like he’s almost ready to roll over. I would expect nothing less from my little brother. He’s such a wonderful little boy.” Delia sat next to Dirk and stroked his head as he tried his hardest to turn over. To her, everything else in the world seemed to fade away. Not even ten days had passed since Dirk had come to the temple, but she was already caring for him like a real sibling.

“Sister Myne, it would be wise to leave Dirk to Delia so that we may begin harspiel practice.”

At Rosina’s prompting, I picked up the smaller harspiel and began practicing. I played the piece I was currently learning a few times, at which point the door opened. Breakfast had finished in the orphanage and Wilma, having seen the children off to the workshop, was here to collect Dirk.

“Good morning, Sister Myne. I have come for Dirk.”

“Good morning, Wilma. Thank you as always. And while you are here, I plan to visit the orphanage this afternoon to discuss picture books with you.”

Wilma nodded with a brief “Understood” in response to my plans, after which she talked to Delia while getting Dirk. She had to ask how he had been last night and how much goat milk he had drunk so that she could predict and prepare for the next time he was hungry.

“We do not have any gray shrine maidens who have experience raising children. If we don’t think of what to do with babies offered to the gods, the orphanage will most likely be unable to function in the future.”

There were no longer any gray shrine maidens raising their own children who could look after the babies, and considering where those children came from, it was in our best interest for gray shrine maidens to continue not having children. I needed to talk to the High Priest to discuss what to do with future babies given to the orphanage. It wouldn’t be reasonable—or possible—to have my attendants bear the burden of every baby that ended up in the orphanage for the rest of time.

“I always feel so lonely when Dirk leaves,” Delia said, rubbing his head regretfully before eventually giving him to Wilma. The energy always drained from Delia the moment Dirk went to the orphanage, leaving her slumped and melancholic, but Rosina always looked relieved. Their reactions were on the exact opposite ends of the spectrum.

I practiced harspiel until third bell, at which point I went with Fran to the High Priest’s room where I would help him until lunch. After lunch, Fran and Rosina now went to their respective rooms to rest. They had both started to look a bit better now that they were getting regular naps in the afternoon, but the exhaustion was still clear on their faces.

“Rest well, you two.”

“Please excuse our absence.”

Now that Fran and Rosina had gone to have their afternoon rest, Delia was the only attendant left in my room. She had finished cleaning and was working on her math, while I was busy making stencils at my desk, waiting for Lutz to arrive. It didn’t take him long to finish his lunch at the Gilberta Company and come over with the finished baby toys.

“Here, Myne. They’re all done.”

“Yay! Thank you.”

Lutz shook the darkish-red rattles to show that they were finished. I really hoped they would make the babies happy. Kamil wasn’t quite old enough to

really get excited over anything, so my plan was to see what Dirk thought first.

“I’ve ordered the paper from Master Benno too. He’ll be ready to supply whenever you want to start printing.”

“You work fast, Lutz.”

“Nah, I still have a long way to go. Mark’s always telling me how much time and effort I waste when doing things.”

It seemed that Mark’s education was really bearing fruit; Lutz was saying that he couldn’t yet compare to Mark, Benno, or Leon, but at his age it would be unreasonable to expect him to be that skilled.

“Myne, don’t forget to bring the stencils from Wilma. I’ll start getting the workshop ready to print.”

“Uh huh, leave it to me.”

After seeing Lutz off, I put one of the rattles into my tote basket. I then walked downstairs with the other one to talk to Damuel, who was in the small hall on the first floor.

“Sir Damuel, I would like to go to the orphanage.”

“Sure, not a problem,” he replied.

I power walked to the door where he was waiting for me, but before I got there he looked around and gave a stern frown. “Wait, apprentice. Where are your attendants? Are you really planning on leaving your chambers without one?”

“...Bwuh?” I had thought that wouldn’t be a problem since Damuel was around, but apparently bodyguards didn’t count as proper accompaniments like attendants did. It would be extremely unladylike for me to leave without one, so my hand was forced.

“Delia, I have something to discuss with Wilma in the orphanage. Please accompany me.”

“Sister Myne, I...” Delia turned around with a stiff expression, but swallowed her words mid-sentence and bit her lip in frustration. She wanted to refuse me, but couldn’t due to her position. Under normal circumstances I wouldn’t want

to force her to do something she wasn't comfortable doing, but with a knight like Damuel waiting on me, I couldn't waste any more time.

"You would only need to accompany me up to the orphanage door. Does that sound manageable for you? I can instead ask Wilma to accompany me on the way back, if you so wish."

"...As you wish."

Delia took the lead, dejectedly advancing down the hallway. I could tell even while following from behind that her shoulders were stiff and her footsteps heavy. Her face was out of view, but I could imagine the desperate expression she was probably wearing.

When we arrived at the orphanage, Delia stopped in place. "Well then, I'll be leaving now."

"I think not, attendant. Open the door before you leave. You would make your mistress, the apprentice, open it herself?" Damuel's harsh voice rang out as Delia turned to leave. I couldn't open the door myself, and couldn't make a knight open the door for me either. Attendants existed so as to relieve their masters of such a duty.

Delia, having been told to open the orphanage door, paled to the point that her face was pure white. Still, she looked at Damuel with no change in her stiff expression, then reached for the door. She shut her eyes tight and grit her teeth, pushing the door open with a trembling hand.

It opened with a heavy creak. Large tables were lined up across the dining hall, which was right in front of the entrance. At the furthest end was a large cushion on which Dirk was laying, surrounded by gray shrine maidens, all of whom looked this way upon hearing the door. They turned their backs on the pillow and knelt at my presence, arms crossed over their chests.

"Sister Myne. I'll be leaving now," Delia murmured, her head lowered so as to avoid seeing inside the orphanage.

"Of course, and I apologize for making you uncomfortable. Thank you, Delia."

"It was nothing." Delia glanced once in Dirk's direction, then started to turn around. But her eyes suddenly shot wide open and she spun around, running

straight for the cushion at the far end of the dining hall. “Dirk!”

He had almost successfully rolled over, with half of his body now over the side of the cushion. If he kept going and made it, he would fall right off. Delia thrust her arms beneath where Dirk would be right as he burbled and toppled over the edge.

“Geez! What would you have done if Dirk had rolled off and hurt himself?! Keep a better eye on him!” Delia’s eyes were flared up in anger as she set Dirk back down in the center of the cushion. Her complaint came from a good place, but the gray shrine maidens had no choice but to kneel and keep their heads down when a blue shrine maiden arrived. All I could do was shake my head at Delia losing herself over Dirk’s cuteness.

“...Well, now that you’re in the orphanage, why don’t you stay and watch over Dirk yourself?”

“Ah?!” Delia’s eyes widened as she realized just where she was standing. She hurriedly straightened up, and I handed her the rattle I had brought with me.

“This is a toy that makes noise. I was going to give it to Dirk myself, but why don’t you give it to him instead? I think he would be happier to play with you than he would with me.”

Delia looked at the red rattle in her hand, a conflicted expression on her face.

“He should be old enough to follow after this red color with his eyes now. Or would you rather I give it to him? I think he would be happier to receive his first toy from his older sister, but...”

I reached to take the rattle from Delia, but she gripped it firmly and held it up high—too high for me to reach.

“You can give it to him, then. Wilma, do you have a moment to talk? Everyone else can return to what they were doing.” I headed to a table within view of Dirk’s cushion with Wilma while the kneeling gray shrine maidens returned to work.

“Dirk, this is a toy Sister Myne gave us. Can you see it?” Delia said gently, shaking the rattle in front of him. Dirk followed it with wide-open eyes; it was obvious that he was attracted to the color and the sound it was making. I had

wanted to see Dirk's reaction so that I could determine whether Kamil would be ready for it, and he really did seem enraptured. No doubt Kamil would be really happy to see it too.

"Wow, he's looking at it," one shrine maiden said.

"I wonder whether he would like music as well?" added another.

The shrine maidens were all looking at Dirk and Delia with great interest, having little experience with babies themselves. That made Delia realize she was in public with other people around who could hear her. She stood up and glared at me, her cheeks blushing red.

"Sister Myne, I'm going back to your chambers! I'll be leaving Dirk in your care, everyone." Delia pushed the rattle into the hands of a nearby shrine maiden before charging out of the orphanage. Now that she had gone inside once, I would imagine that if she very gradually spent more and more time here, she would adjust to leaving her comfort zone like Wilma had.

"Sister Myne, will Delia be quite alright? I know she has lasting trauma from her time in the orphanage," Wilma said anxiously as she watched Delia hurry out the door.

"...I wonder. I feel like she'll be fine, assuming Dirk's cuteness keeps influencing her. She thinks she hates the orphanage due to the memories she has of her time here, but the cellar Delia was living in is nothing like it used to be."

Delia had spent all of her time here in a miserable cellar, and had then been sent to the High Bishop's room on the day of her baptism. To her, the orphanage in its entirety was just that neglected cellar. Before today, she had only passed by once or twice at most; Delia would need to really feel for herself that the orphanage had changed, and if she got used to coming here then it shouldn't be too much of a problem for her to at least enter the dining hall. Besides, if she didn't get used to visiting the orphanage soon, she would no longer be able to see Dirk at all. He would be moved to the rooms where the pre-baptism children stayed once he was old enough to sleep soundly through the night.

"I just hope she doesn't end up separated from her cute little brother," I

added.

“Each day when I go to get Dirk, Delia delays handing him over for as long as possible, all the while wearing the loneliest expression you’ve ever seen. I can’t help but feel that we are doing something wrong by taking him away. It would be sad for both of them if they were to be separated, so I certainly hope that Delia adjusts to the orphanage as soon as possible.” Wilma gave a faint smile, her features lacking the exhaustion that could be seen on Rosina’s and Fran’s faces.

“You do not seem very tired, Wilma. Is that because of all the people here who are able to help you?”

“I only look after Dirk during the day, and I do have others help me. Rosina and Fran end up all on their own when looking after him at night, correct? That sounds quite difficult to manage.”

It seemed that although Wilma only looked after Dirk during the day, some of the younger children felt like he had taken her from them and were acting like babies themselves. Some would cling to her at night when she tried to put them to bed.

“You are like the mother of this orphanage, Wilma. It must be difficult having so many needy children to look after.”

“I recall my loving mother taking care of me in the cellar before my baptism, and I want to give these children who lost their mothers the same love I received. Nothing makes me happier than them thinking of me as their mother.” Wilma smiled, brimming with love for the cute little children, and at that moment I was thankful from the bottom of my heart that I had assigned her to manage the orphanage.

With that topic over, we moved on to discussing the picture books. I began by telling Wilma that I wanted the stencils, since we would be starting a new round of printing for the picture books soon. I then explained that we had finished making colored ink and that I wanted her to plan her future art around it. As we were using the same format of printing as before, that meant we would need a stencil for each color. Finally, I told her that once I had finished making the wax stencils, she would be able to draw more detailed art.

“You truly do love books, Sister Myne. To think that you would continue inventing so many new techniques for this... I will put my absolute all into drawing for you.”

“Thank you, Wilma.”

By the time we had finished our discussion and I had the stencils from Wilma, Dirk had gotten hungry. He began to cry, but even without Wilma saying anything the other gray shrine maidens were already speedily bringing goat milk from the cellar and preparing to feed him. They were used to the process by now. If they could look after Dirk without Wilma, then it was probably best for me to return to my chambers sooner rather than later; they all had to be extremely conscious of me while working, which was beyond distracting for them.

“I know it is a heavy load on you all, but please continue taking care of Dirk. Wilma, could I ask you to walk me back to my chambers?”

Having spoken to the gray shrine maidens, I started to make my way back from the orphanage.

Both Sides of the Story

When I returned to my chambers, I could already hear Delia inside yelling “GEEEEZ!” Wilma and I looked at each other. Delia had generally been in such a good mood since Dirk had come along that neither of us had heard her this hysteric in a while.

“I see you can hear Delia too.”

“I wonder what happened?”

“Let’s hurry back, apprentice,” Damuel prompted with a guarded expression. I power walked as fast I could to my chambers, where I found Fran and Delia arguing.

“The High Priest can’t be trusted!”

“He is trustworthy.”

It seemed less like an argument and more like Delia gnashing her teeth at him, but still, it was a rare combination to see. I couldn’t help but blink in surprise.

“Fran, Delia, what is going on?” I said. It seemed neither of them had noticed me before then as Fran’s eyes opened wide. He hurriedly apologized, welcoming me inside.

“Welcome back, Sister Myne. I apologize for my unsightly behavior.”

In contrast to Fran, who had quickly composed himself, Delia ran over and gave me a sharp glare, yelling “Sister Myne! What’s the meaning of this?!” I had no idea what she was referring to.

“Erm, whatever are you talking about?”

“Delia! You must not speak to your mistress like that,” Fran rebuked, but Delia just tightly gripped my shoulders.

“I’m asking what all this business about having Dirk be adopted is about!”

“As I have repeated many times, Delia, Arno said that the idea has already been rejected. Let go of Sister Myne.” Fran detached Delia’s hands from me without letting his calm exterior falter, but I still had no idea what was going on. I was completely out of the loop.

...Could someone... please... explain?

It seemed that I wasn’t the only one at a loss here; Wilma was also blinking in surprise at Fran and Delia’s behavior.

Umm, what am I supposed to do in situations like this again? Right, right. I need to listen to get both sides of the story. Recalling what the High Priest had told me before, I was able to get a handle on the situation just a little better. I looked around, then first spoke to Wilma.

“Wilma, thank you for walking me back. You may return now. If you stay here until I have listened to them both, problems may arise in the orphanage.”

“As you wish,” replied Wilma, but she turned back to look at Fran and Delia several times on her way out of my chambers.

“Sister Myne!”

“I will listen to you both on the second floor, Delia, so for now just prepare some tea.”

I climbed the stairs with Fran, hoping on some level that Delia would calm down during the process of boiling water and carefully making tea.

On the second floor we found Rosina, who was sitting in front of a harpsiel with a sleepy look on her face. We made eye contact, and while wavering a bit she stood up to greet me. “Welcome back, Sister Myne.”

“Rosina, do you know what happened?”

“No. Delia woke me up, but I did not listen for the details.”

It seemed that Delia’s shouting had woken her up during her afternoon nap. Rosina, speaking less eloquently than usual, was making her displeasure apparent even if it didn’t show on her face.

“You may return to your room to rest a little more, Rosina.”

“I believe I will.” Rosina swayed as she returned to her room.

I sat down in the chair Fran had pulled back for me, and decided to hear his side of the story first. “Sorry, but I couldn’t understand a word of what you two were saying. Could you explain the circumstances, Fran?”

“On her way back from the orphanage, Delia bumped into Arno, who was carrying a message from the High Priest, and the two of them came here. I was in the middle of my rest, but Delia called for me and I got dressed at once to meet with him.”

It seemed that not only had he been forced awake during his nap like Rosina, but he had been pushed into meeting with Arno and listening to Delia’s angry ranting at the same time. Had I been there, I could have dealt with Arno on my own.

“I apologize for my absence.”

“It is nothing to worry about,” Fran said with a dismissive shake of his head. “Even when you are here, I would like for you to call me when Arno visits.”

It seemed he felt the need to hear any messages from the High Priest whether I was there or not.

“Furthermore, if Arno had truly only been here to pass on a message, this would not have been a problem at all. I did not expect Delia to explode with anger like that.” Fran glanced toward the kitchen and sighed. His frustration was clear on his face, which was rare for him. That told me more than enough about how harsh Delia had been.

“What was Arno’s message, then?”

“That the High Priest did look for someone to adopt Dirk, but that the search was as difficult as expected.”

According to Fran, the High Priest had looked for someone to adopt Dirk, just like I had first asked him to. Arno came to tell us that although they hadn’t found anybody, it would be best for me to keep my spirits up and continue raising him in the orphanage.

I had pretty much given up on the adoption when the High Priest had said

that baby boys were rarely if ever adopted, instead switching my focus to signing a contract with Dirk when I myself was adopted by a noble. To be honest, I had almost entirely forgotten about asking the High Priest to search for someone to adopt Dirk.

Wow, now that's what I call integrity.

I was impressed after hearing Fran's explanation, but Delia had just come up with the tea and hearing that had reignited her wrath. She set the cups down in front of me rather hard and then glared at Fran. "Why would the High Priest of all people be talking about someone adopting Dirk?!"

Judging from Fran's explanation, neither he nor Arno knew that Dirk had the Devouring. As it stood, Delia's wrath was entirely focused on the point that people had been talking about Dirk being adopted outside of her knowledge.

I lowered my eyes. The High Priest had told me to hide that Dirk had the Devouring. How could I explain to Delia that we had been searching for someone to take him in and save him from his own mana?

"The High Priest must have made a hobby of ripping families apart! First he did so with Sister Myne, and now he's trying to do the same with me and Dirk!"

"How many times have I said that the High Priest would never take joy in this?! He must have his own reasoning."

It seemed that in Delia's head, the High Priest was a villain who ripped apart families whenever he got the chance. One could hardly blame Fran for getting a little angry when someone he respected was being badmouthed like that.

"Delia." I exhaled slowly, like I was taking deep breaths, then looked at her. "There are no gray shrine maidens here equipped to raise a child. To that end, I asked the High Priest to look for someone who may wish to adopt him, as I thought he may be happier that way."

Delia's anger turned straight toward me. "What?! *You* wanted to tear us apart, Sister Myne?!"

I shook my head and corrected her. "No. You didn't even want to look after Dirk at first, remember? I didn't think anybody would want to."

Delia seemed to at least remember what she had said back then. Her eyes opened wide, and she faltered a little. “W-Well... that was only when he had just arrived.”

“Yes, and it was when he had just arrived that I consulted the High Priest.”

Delia fell silent, her anger cooling down.

“There are no gray shrine maidens who have raised babies before, and none of us know how best to look after him. There are no wet nurses who would be willing to visit the temple, Fran and Rosina are barely getting any sleep due to having to watch over him at night, and ultimately, I thought someone adopting him might be the best solution to everyone’s problems.”

As it was now, Fran and Rosina were at least taking naps during the day, and Delia was watching over him more than she said she would, but for those first few desperate days, Dirk really had been an immense burden on everyone. Delia remembered that, so while she did give me an unsatisfied pout, she just grumbled without saying anything.

“I requested that the High Priest look for someone to adopt Dirk, and he diligently did so. I didn’t have much hope since he had told me from the start that he would be unlikely to find anyone, but he nevertheless looked to the best of his ability.”

“...Oh, I see. I understand now,” Delia said with a nod, her tense shoulders loosening up.

“I did not expect you to look after Dirk as eagerly as you have been; now I am glad that no one was found to adopt him. Arno did say that we should continue raising him in the orphanage, did he not?”

“He did. The High Priest said to keep our spirits high and do our best raising him,” Fran added, which made Delia blink in surprise for a minute. She then peered at me, as if wanting to remove the last trace of doubt that still remained in her mind.

“...So you won’t rip me and Dirk apart, Sister Myne?”

“Of course not. I know how much you care for Dirk, Delia, and I know all too well the pain of being separated from one’s family.”

“...Thank goodness.” Delia pressed a hand to her chest and sighed in relief. “I never want to let Dirk go. He’s the only... the only family I’ve ever had...”

Ten days later, Johann had finished making the iron. It was the first thing he had completed out of everything I had ordered—perhaps because it was the simplest to make, or maybe because it stimulated his creative mind the most. Thanks to the timing, I decided to try strengthening the stencils with wax before we started printing for the second picture book. The wax being a little thick wouldn’t matter given that we weren’t using a file yet.

“We should be able to print loads more using this!” I proudly puffed out my chest at the wax-strengthened stencil, whereas Lutz just crossed his arms and cocked his head.

“...Hey, Myne, didn’t the High Priest say not to print too much? Is printing loads more really a good idea?”

“Waxing the paper will let us reuse the stencils, which means we can print over a longer period of time.”

“Don’t dodge the question!” Lutz yelled, but I had no intention of giving up my picture book stencils. I would eventually be using movable type printing for text-heavy books, but illustrations had to be remade.

“This is to lessen the load on Wilma. Isn’t being able to reuse stencils just better in every way?”

Lutz, knowing how much work it was for Wilma to draw the art then cut out the tiny lines, grimaced and rubbed his forehead. “Just the art stencils, alright?”

I waxed exclusively the art stencils, which I then gave to Gil. All the printing was now done by him and the gray priests in the Myne Workshop.

Lutz had a little more time on his hands thanks to Gil taking care of workshop business, and as a result, Lutz, Damuel, and I were able to spend our days alternating between going to the workshop and Gilberta Company, and going to the temple. The Italian restaurant was close to being done, its doors and window sills in the process of being installed, so I was actually pretty busy going there with Benno and visiting the ink workshop to record research results from

Heidi, among other things.

“Myne, why’d you fall silent? Thinking of something?”

“Uh huh. Kamil.”

“Again?”

Despite my busyness, my mind was always dominated by thoughts of making toys for Kamil. According to reports from the orphanage, Dirk loved the wooden rattle I had made, but whenever he tried to hold it himself he’d drop it on his face and start crying. I felt bad thinking about a toy falling on Kamil’s cute face and hurting him, so if possible I wanted to make something that would be less painful.

“Lutz, I think I want some little bells.”

“What for?”

“I can use them to make a rattle small enough to squeeze.” There were a lot of bells and other metal objects that made noises here, but I hadn’t seen any that looked like cat bells, the tiny round bells you might find on an animal collar. It might be hard to get them to make a pretty sound, but the design itself was simple enough that Johann could probably make them if asked.

“Okay. Let’s go to the smithy.”

The smithy wasn’t far from the ink workshop, and I eagerly started making my way there.

“Morning.”

“Welcome, welcome. Heeeey! Gutenberg! Lady Myne’s here!” A smith who I had never seen before turned and casually shouted for Gutenberg without even a flicker of a smile on his face. Apparently they had gotten so used to the name that it wasn’t even a joke anymore.

Johann came to the front of the workshop and weakly muttered for the smith not to call him Gutenberg, but was very casually ignored.

“Lady Myne, what brings you here today? I haven’t finished the styluses yet.”

I had actually ordered a wide range of different styluses for writing on the

wax paper, which meant the job would take him longer to finish.

“Well, you could actually have some apprentices do this work instead, but I want some bells like these.” I started drawing the schematics for the cat bells, which Johann peered at with great interest. As expected, he had only ever made larger, more traditionally shaped bells, never small and round ones.

“Lady Myne, are those notches just for decoration?”

“They’re important for producing the right sound. The notches don’t need to look exactly like this, but please don’t exclude them entirely. They need to be narrow enough that the balls inside won’t fall out.”

Bells would apparently make different sounds depending on the size of the notches, the thickness of the metal, the size of the balls, and the materials used, but I didn’t remember the details for all of that. All I knew was that if you put metal balls inside of a larger metal ball, it would make a noise when shaken. Once they were ready, I’d have him put the smaller cat bells into a larger metal shell; there needed to be two layers so that the noise would still be audible when put into a stuffed animal.

“...Yeah, these won’t be too hard to make. Are these for printing too?”

“No, I want to use these for baby toys. Even I order things unrelated to printing sometimes,” I said with pursed lips.

Johann beamed a wide grin. “Hey, this is the first time you’ve ordered something unrelated to books or printing. I thought books were the only thing you cared about,” he said, a clear sense of relief in his voice. Right now my head was full of Kamil, but in general I only cared about books. That said, I didn’t feel the need to correct his misunderstanding. He could be happy while it lasted.

Or so I thought, but Lutz went ahead and shot him down. “You were right. Myne only cares about books. If you think you can escape your fate as Gutenberg, you’ve got another thing coming.”

“I know that. Can’t you at least let me have a little hope?” Johann said with an exaggerated groan. Lutz slapped his back and said he needed to get used to me as soon as possible, which was the nail in his coffin.

“Yup. And Lutz, don’t forget you’re my oldest, most respectable Gutenberg,” I

said, which for some reason made him slump over just as sadly as Johann.

Why? I was just trying to give him a compliment. So strange.

“I’ll just be going straight home today,” I said to Damuel after leaving the smithy. But at that moment, the chime of bells sounded out through the city—bells signaling an emergency. Seconds later, a red light shot into the sky from the east gate. It was someone calling for aid using a magic tool.

As a knight, Damuel was the first to react. He glared at the red light by the east gate with a hard expression while picking me up on the spot.

“Let’s go.”

That was all he said before running straight to my home. He advanced down the roads and through side alleys with confidence, having possibly memorized them all while following me around the lower city. Lutz was running close behind him all the while, despite blinking in utter confusion.

“I know the roads by now. Lutz, you can go home or to your store. Whichever works,” Damuel said, still running. He normally dropped me off at the well in the plaza, but this time he raced up the stairs with me in his arms before rapping a fist against our front door.

“Yes, who is it— Myne?!” Mom stepped aside to let Damuel in, who quickly set me down. Mom blinked in surprise as he looked between me and her, a hard expression on his face.

“Something happened at the east gate that made them call for the help of the Knight’s Order.”

“The east gate?!”

“It was a thin light, not a thick one, so I would guess it isn’t anything violent. They likely just need us knights to make a firm decision on some noble matter. That said, I will remain here until the apprentice’s safety is secured.”

Mom was stunned by the sudden visit from a knight, but she grasped the circumstances and nodded quickly. “Please keep Myne safe.”

Damuel stood by the front door so that he was ready to react on the spot if

something happened. Kamil had started crying so Mom went into the bedroom, while I got Damuel a glass of water since he was a little out of breath.

“Ah. Thank you, apprentice.” Damuel gulped the contents of the cup down in one go, then took a few deep breaths to collect himself. I knew I would just be in his way if I stuck around any longer, so I went to the storage room. I wanted to know what cloth we had for the stuffed animal rattle I wanted to make.

“There’s a lot of white, so maybe I’ll make a rabbit?”

After finding some cloth that felt nice, I started getting to work on making stencils at the kitchen table. All of a sudden, a white bird like the magic ones I had seen before phased through the wall and came flying this way. It surprised the heck out of me, popping out of nowhere like that, but Damuel just casually extended his arm toward it. The bird settled on it and opened its mouth.

“Damuel, after delivering the apprentice shrine maiden to the temple or her home, regroup with the Knight’s Order.” The bird repeated the order three times in a low, gravelly male voice before crumbling and turning into a yellow feystone. Damuel made his gleaming wand appear from somewhere like the High Priest usually did and tapped the stone while chanting something. Whatever he did made it turn back into a white bird.

“The apprentice shrine maiden is safe at home. I will return at once,” he said before waving his wand. The bird flew through the wall and disappeared. “Apprentice, I’ll be regrouping with the Knight’s Order to get briefed on the situation. Under no circumstances should you leave the house before I return. Understood?”

“Understood.”

After emphasizing that I wasn’t to even go outside to the plaza, Damuel left. I had no idea what kind of emergency it was, but if he was being called away to regroup with the Knight’s Order, it probably had something to do with me.

“Myne, did the knight just leave?” Mom, having finished feeding Kamil, came out of the bedroom wearing an uneasy expression. It seemed she had found comfort in Damuel, a knight, being here with us. At the moment, there was only me, Mom, and Kamil still inside; nobody would be able to act if something happened.

“He was summoned back by someone in the Knight’s Order. If they don’t think Sir Damuel needs to stay here with me then they think I’ll be safe, which means it’s either already over or nothing too serious,” I explained.

Mom gave a faint smile, looking just a little relieved. “Oh, he left because it’s over. That’s a relief.”

In the end, we didn’t even have to wait for Damuel to get back with an explanation, since Dad came home with one first. He had started working at the east gate in spring, and had been at the center of today’s ruckus.

“Dad, what in the world happened over there?”

“Yeah, guess I should tell you about it, Myne.” After dinner, Dad explained what happened while slowly sipping away at his beer. “A noble from another duchy kicked up a fuss when trying to enter the city.”

The emergency incident had been an outsider noble trying to force their way in. Just like the High Priest had told us before, the rules regarding nobles entering and leaving the city had been changed in the spring, and one of those rules was that nobles from other duchies couldn’t enter the city without the archduke’s permission. The letters of introduction that had been customary up until now would no longer be accepted. The nobles of Ehrenfest knew this since they had heard it directly from the archduke during the winter gathering, but nobles from other duchies didn’t know the rules had changed. The result was a noble getting blocked at the gate by a commoner guard, and ultimately exploding with anger.

“The higher-ups must have predicted something like that would happen. They had everything ready for the Knight’s Order to move in if any nobles started causing problems at the gate.”

“Wow. The archduke sure thought things out, huh?”

Apparently, it had been Dad himself who had used the emergency magic tool given to the gate by the Knight’s Order to call for help. It was composed of two pieces: a hammer-shaped tool with a red stone inside, and a second, separate red stone. To make the beam of light shoot up into the air, all one had to do was strike the second stone using the hammer-shaped tool. The one Fran had used in the carriage back during Spring Prayer was probably of the same kind.

Nobles could act however they wanted to commoners, but when nobles of the city were involved, those from other duchies were at a disadvantage. The outsider noble had apparently left grumbling after the Knight's Order had explained that he would need the archduke's permission to enter.

"Problems caused by nobles are best solved by nobles. Honestly, I'm real glad they came to help."

"Still, he had a letter of introduction from a noble here, right? Why did someone send him a letter of introduction if they knew that he wouldn't be able to enter without the archduke's permission?"

"Who knows."

Maybe it was a letter of introduction he had been given before the spring. I tilted my head in confusion, despite the answer being impossible for me to know, when Dad looked at me with a serious expression.

"Myne, you need to be real careful about staying safe. Remember what the High Priest said? Nobles from other duchies might be coming after you," he warned, and I gave a slow nod. "I'll protect the gate and call the Knight's Order the second any dangerous noble tries getting in. You just be sure not to go anywhere without your bodyguard."

Dad promising to protect me made me so happy that despite the circumstances, I couldn't help but smile.

The Two Who Left

Damuel didn't come the next day or the day after that. Since I wasn't even allowed to go to the plaza, I had nothing but spare time, which I spent thinking up the content for my third picture book and making stuffed animal rattles with Tuuli. She was apparently going to give the one she had made to Corinna's daughter, Renate.

"I'll bring it when we go to her place to see the baby. We *are* going to see her, right?"

"It would be a bit awkward if we didn't go given how much the Gilberta Company has helped us, not to mention that Benno gave us a gift when Kamil was born."

My plan was to visit Corinna once all of the danger in the air had settled down, and Tuuli was more than ready to come with me. Girl babies were probably pretty cute too, plus I was kind of looking forward to seeing Otto going head over heels for his new daughter.

"...But, look. The one you made is cuter, Myne." Tuuli looked down at the finished rattles and pursed her lips. She had made a white bear-like thing, while I made something more similar to a rabbit. They were kind of lumpy since we had stuffed the white cloth with rags instead of cotton.

"Your sewing is way better than mine, though." I had stitched mine together a little haphazardly, but like Tuuli said, it was still pretty cute.

As I sat looking at my successful work in satisfaction, Tuuli peered over from beside me and shook her head. "If you don't learn to sew a little better, you'll never get married."

"That's fine! I'm prepared to dedicate my whole life to books." What men looked for in wives around here was good health, being able to work, and having good sewing skills. I didn't meet a single one of these criteria, so my fate was sealed; I had given up on marriage a long time ago. Just like in my Urano

days, I would be just fine living with books as my soulmates. And to be honest, I would much rather keep making and reading books than be married off to someone and have to spend my days wrestling with thread to make clothes for my new family.

If only we had the cat bells to finish these toys, I sadly thought to myself. But on the evening of my third day in isolation, Lutz came over with them.

“Johann brought these things to the store. Whaddaya need them for?” he asked, rolling a few around in his palm. They let out cute little tinkling sounds as the smaller bells inside knocked into each other.

Wowee. Johann knocks it out of the park yet again.

“They’re little bells, and I’m putting them in these toys. That way they’ll make noise when you shake them.”

The cat bells had to go inside the toys so that small children wouldn’t accidentally swallow them, and the eyes and mouths were just patterned cloth rather than separate parts that could be taken off. I had kept a small slit open on each toy so that I could put the bells in, allowing me to quickly complete them in front of Lutz.

I shook the finished toys, and a cute clinking sound could be heard from inside the cloth. *Success.*

“Kamil, it’s done. Can you hear the bells?” I tried shaking my rabbit next to Kamil’s ears, and he blinked in surprise several times. He couldn’t hold up his head yet, which meant he couldn’t turn to look at the toy, but his eyes were searching for the source of the noise.

“Cute! You’re so cute, Kamil.” I broke into a smile at his reaction to my toy, and seconds later he started crying. It seemed my road to becoming a beloved older sister was far from over.

In the end, it was on the morning of my fifth day of being stuck inside that Fran and Damuel came to pick me up at my house.

“Good morning, Sister Myne.”

“Good morning Fran, Sir Damuel.”

“Morning, apprentice.” Damuel nodded in response to my greeting before turning to look at Dad, who was still at home since his work didn’t start until the afternoon today. “If you’ll excuse me, I’m here for the apprentice.”

“Please take good care of her, sir.” Dad thumped a fist twice against his chest in salute. Damuel responded in kind, a serious look on his face as he spoke again.

“Gunther, I have a message from Lord Ferdinand. The archduke is presently visiting the Sovereignty and will not be around to grant any entry permits in the near future. You may be shown fake permits, so take care not to accept any as valid. Understood?”

“Sir, yes, sir!” Dad gave a firm nod, a hard look on his face. He was always so cool when he was doing his job.

“Okay, bye everyone.”

“Be careful.”

We met up with Lutz in the plaza and headed to the temple. I could see Fran’s expression darken as we got closer.

“Fran, what’s wrong? Your brow is furrowed.”

“I will explain in a moment. It is not something to talk about in transit,” he said before closing his mouth into a bitter expression.

“You will know once we arrive at the temple, whether you want to or not,” Damuel added. I looked up at him and saw that he was wearing his usual noble-esque smile that hid all emotion and conveyed absolutely nothing.

“Alright, well, I’m off to the forest,” said Lutz.

“Okay. Bye-bye.”

We split up with Lutz in front of the workshop like usual before heading to my chambers. I waited like a proper lady for Fran to open the door for me, but the atmosphere when I went inside felt so different that I couldn’t help but blink in surprise.

“...It certainly is quiet in here.”

It was almost uncomfortably quiet. I would normally be able to hear Dirk crying, or Delia playing with him, or the sounds of several people moving around, but today there was nothing. It was so quiet, in fact, that I could hear the chefs working in the kitchen all the way at the front.

Dirk must be asleep, I thought to myself while climbing the stairs as silently as possible. When I reached the top, I found Rosina wiping down the table. That actually worried me, since Rosina usually only played music and did paperwork so as to not hurt her fingers; it was always Delia who did minor chores like that.

“Good morning, Rosina. Where is Delia? Is she feeling sick?” I asked, looking around. Rosina lowered her eyes, then put down the cloth she was using and headed for the closet.

“Delia is no longer with us. She took Dirk and returned to the High Bishop.”

“Wha?” The news came so suddenly that I couldn’t even process it at first. I looked up at Rosina, confused, and with my robes in hand she searched for words before giving a sad smile.

“Sister Myne, let us get you changed before we talk. Fran cannot come upstairs until that is done.”

Rosina changed me into my blue apprentice robes, then asked me to sit down as she rang a bell. Fran came up the stairs holding some tea he had prepared and set a cup down in front of me. I took a sip, but despite Fran’s tea always tasting good I didn’t taste much of anything this time.

I set my cup down and looked at the both of them. Rosina spoke first.

“It happened yesterday. Fran and I went for our daily naps, and when we awoke Dirk’s cushion and diapers had vanished from the room. We couldn’t find Delia either so, already worried, I went to the orphanage to look for them. But Dirk was nowhere to be seen. According to Wilma, Delia had come to get him, saying that she was taking him with her since they’re family.”

Wilma had apparently let her go, since she wanted to show her support for Delia having gone all the way to the orphanage despite her misgivings to see Dirk. She hadn’t even considered that one of my attendants would take him anywhere except my chambers.

“I heard this from Rosina and requested an audience with the High Priest. I thought it would be necessary to report the disappearance of a blue shrine maiden’s attendant so that a search could begin,” Fran said with a sigh. It would be serious business if she had gotten in trouble with a blue priest while I was absent. But on his way to see the High Priest, Fran saw Delia with the High Bishop, Dirk in her arms. He tried to question her there, but the High Bishop stopped him; he had no other choice but to ask the High Priest what he knew.

“How was that allowed? Taking Delia makes sense given that she used to be one of the High Bishop’s attendants, but Dirk isn’t allowed to leave the orphanage, is he?” I had previously been told not to bring Dirk to a discussion with the High Priest, and the High Bishop seemed like he would be the kind of guy to demand that “disgusting children” be locked in the orphanage until their baptism, so it didn’t make sense that an orphan like Dirk would be allowed in the noble section of the temple.

Fran lowered his eyes. “Dirk is no longer an orphan.”

“Wha?”

“Dirk has been adopted by a noble, with the High Bishop’s authorization.”

The High Bishop’s signature was enough to validate an adoption, even without my signature as the orphanage director or the High Priest’s—if the adopting parent was a commoner, that is.

“Do noble adoptions not require the approval of the archduke? Sir Damuel told us just this morning that the archduke is absent.”

“According to the High Priest, adoptions involving nobles from other duchies do not need the approval of our archduke.” In other words, no matter where you went, there were people who would specialize in exploiting loopholes in the law.

Adoptions to those outside of the duchy only needed the blood prints of the High Bishop, the adoptive father, and the child; Dirk had already been adopted by an outsider noble.

“...This isn’t something to be happy about, is it?”

“No, the High Priest looked quite displeased.” Fran crossed his arms and

furrowed his brow just like the High Priest often did, then raised his head and looked me straight in the eyes. “Sister Myne, please give up on Delia and cut her off. I know well that you are a deeply compassionate person, but she acted on her own without the approval of her mistress, bringing you great misfortune in the process. She cannot continue to serve as your attendant. You should relieve her of her duties if she elects to stay with the High Bishop.”

Delia would remain as my attendant until I announced that I was dismissing her. Rosina was fervently nodding, agreeing that she should have alerted me before going to the High Bishop for anything.

It would be one thing if this had happened right after Delia had become my attendant, but I had thought we were getting along quite well lately. Delia’s sudden betrayal made my head hurt. *Why?* That was the question that stirred my heart most. I looked down at my swaying tea before saying anything.

“...I will dismiss Delia. Please call her so that I may inform her.”

Fran’s stiff expression softened; it seemed that he thought I would be more hesitant to dismiss her. His arms still crossed in front of his chest, he said “Understood,” then left.

I picked up my cup again now that the discussion had settled down. The tea that tasted like nothing before was now unbearably bitter.

When Fran returned, Delia was with him. The rather pleased expression on her face was a sharp contrast to Fran’s grimace. She casually walked over to me, her crimson hair fluttering behind her.

“Good morning, Sister Myne. What would you like to talk about?” There wasn’t a trace of malice in her expression. She looked so normal and spoke so much like she usually did that I felt a little dizzy; for a second I even wondered if she hadn’t actually taken Dirk to the High Bishop at all. But Fran and Rosina’s stiff expressions brought me back to my senses, and I shook my head.

“I heard that you returned to the High Bishop.”

“I did,” Delia said with an expression so full of glee that she was positively sparkling. “When I told the High Bishop that the High Priest had looked for someone to adopt Dirk but couldn’t find anyone, he found someone for us

immediately! And a noble father at that. Isn't that incredible? Since adoptions by nobles here would require the archduke's permission and thus be delayed, he went out of his way to search among nobles from other duchies. He has many more connections than the High Priest does."

"Does that not mean that you and Dirk will end up separated?" I would have thought that Dirk would be sent to the other duchy at once. Perhaps Delia would be sent with him as a caretaker. Either way, the High Bishop had certainly gone out of his way to get an adoption that wouldn't need the archduke's approval.

These ominous signs were making me visibly worried, but Delia just laughed. "Dirk will be raised by the High Bishop until he comes of age, as he is no longer an orphan. The High Bishop will give us one of his attendant rooms and allow Dirk and I to live together."

...Wasn't that odd? If Dirk was going to be raised in the temple until he came of age, he wouldn't be able to go to the Royal Academy despite being adopted, nor would he be able to grow up with his new family. For what purpose, then, would the noble have adopted Dirk? Even assuming he was just after his mana, it seemed like a strange decision to let the High Bishop raise him.

I was getting increasingly worried the more I learned, but Delia gave a happy smile, her cheeks blushing a rosy red. "Now I won't have to be separated from Dirk. Had I remained with you, he would have been sent away to the orphanage in no time at all."

Since Delia still couldn't bring herself to go to the orphanage, in her eyes, Dirk being sent there while she remained in the director's chambers was the same as them being ripped apart entirely. It was true that they wouldn't be living together even if she grew more comfortable going to the orphanage, and once Dirk was baptized he would be sent to the boys' building where it would be even harder for them to meet. What could I say to Delia, considering that she had taken matters into her own hands to spend more time with Dirk?

"The two of you aren't being treated poorly, are you?"

"No, of course not," Delia replied with a firm shake of her head.

At the moment, the High Bishop was only showing Delia his good side. If she

only knew him as a kindly grandpa, then she wouldn't believe anything bad I said about him.

I took in a deep breath. "In that case, I hereby dismiss you as my attendant. You will now serve the High Bishop. Are you okay with that?"

"Very. If that's all you have to say, Sister Myne, I would like to return to Dirk. His adoptive father will be arriving soon."

It had felt like there was ash in my mouth when I forced myself to announce her dismissal, and yet Delia didn't seem to feel anything in particular at all. She was just excited to leave and get back to Dirk as soon as possible.

"My apologies for calling you over here. But I hope you know that Fran and Rosina were both worried sick looking for you and Dirk when you left unannounced. Wilma was surprised, Gil was shocked to find the room empty when he came back from the workshop, and I myself was shaken when I heard the news this morning. We were all worried about what might have happened to you and Dirk. I would have liked for you to have at least said something before you left."

In the end, I did let her know how I felt, hoping more for her to understand what she had done than to make her feel bad for it. Delia thought back, then smiled to hide whatever she was really feeling.

"...The High Bishop said you wouldn't approve of me taking Dirk, so I decided to be more stealthy. I do apologize for that. I'm sorry," she said, averting her gaze as she shifted the blame to the High Bishop.

So she had known that she was doing something I wouldn't approve of after all.

"Well, good luck raising Dirk. I imagine things won't be easy for you."

"Thank you, and goodbye." Delia gave me a true smile this time, then left to return to Dirk. I was glad to see that she was happy, but I knew there was no way that would last.

Once she was gone, I looked to Fran and Rosina. "...Will Delia and Dirk be okay?"

“There is nothing more we can do now that Dirk is no longer an orphan. Delia chose this fate herself,” Rosina said firmly.

I gave her a hesitant nod. “...You’re right.” But I still wanted to help her however I could, and as I thought about what I could do, Fran knelt down beside me. He took my hand and looked up at me with deadly serious eyes.

“Sister Myne, even if Delia is to come calling, you must never visit the High Bishop under any circumstances,” he said. I blinked in confusion, and with a face full of worry he continued. “When I went to get Delia, the High Bishop was extremely insistent that you go to his room to fetch her yourself. I repeated that it would not be proper for a mistress to leave her chambers for her attendant, and in the end successfully left with Delia, but his change in behavior is frightening to me.”

The High Bishop had ordered that I never be brought to his room—he didn’t even want to look at me. Yet now he was telling Fran to bring me to him. He wanted me to dismiss Delia in his room. That change in behavior made Fran feel uncomfortable, and it certainly was strange.

“Furthermore, it seems that it was the High Bishop who had given the letter of invitation to the noble who caused a stir at the east gate the other day. His name was on it, and the Knight’s Order went to question him. He claimed that he just wanted to strengthen the bonds between our duchies, but the High Priest predicts that he wanted the noble inside the city so that he could acquire Dirk.”

“Why would the High Bishop send a letter of invitation if the archduke hadn’t approved it?”

“It seems he didn’t know,” Fran said. I tilted my head in confusion, and he lowered his voice with an uncomfortable expression. “The High Bishop spent most of the winter in the temple for the Dedication Ritual, and since he is not legally a noble, he is rarely invited to winter social gatherings. He simply was not aware that the rules had been changed.”

The High Bishop technically wasn’t a noble, and was thus not invited to the gatherings of noble society where the archduke had announced the change in rules. He had therefore tried inviting a noble from another duchy just like he

had in the past.

“We do not know why the High Bishop has given Dirk to an outsider noble and drawn Delia to his side. I request that you take great care and approach the future with great caution.”

Fran’s hands were shaking, perhaps out of worry for me. I squeezed them and gave him a nod.

The Shadow Falls

“Sister Myne, would you consider taking on a new attendant to replace Delia?”

“Do I need a new one right away?” I wasn’t living in the temple like I had been during the winter, so as far as I was aware there wasn’t enough work to require immediately replacing Delia.

“The sooner the better.”

Now that Dirk was gone, Fran could sleep at night and handle the more physical labor with Gil. Rosina, however, didn’t want to hurt her fingers doing chores, and Fran went on to explain that it would be better for everyone if Delia was replaced soon.

“If I may speak frankly for a moment, I know that you are still worrying about Delia and have a tendency to be soft on those you care about. It would be easier for me to relax if there was someone other than Delia here for you to direct your compassion toward.”

I fell silent, unable to disagree that I was still soft at heart. He must have seen me looking around the room aimlessly for Delia at times, and in the end, Fran was right: it was more important for me to work toward easing Fran and Rosina’s worries than for me to keep worrying about Delia, who was gone and would stay gone.

I sighed and briefly lowered my eyes. “...If I am to pick one from the gray shrine maidens, perhaps Monika and Nicola will do?” They had both helped Ella cook throughout the whole of winter. Wilma had recommended their services, and I already knew they were diligent workers, not to mention that I could entrust both chores and helping the chefs to them.

In reality, since the Italian restaurant was on the verge of completion, all of the chefs except for Ella would soon be leaving. Ella wanted to stay to learn more recipes, and I had already negotiated with Benno to make that a reality. It

had worked out for the best anyway since we needed someone to direct the new chefs Benno would be sending our way. Plus, it would be easiest for Ella to work with Monika and Nicola since they already knew each other.

“Monika *and* Nicola? Sister Myne, would you be capable of taking both on at once?” Fran, knowing the financial state of my chambers, whispered his concerns to me in a low voice. It was true that they might be a slight strain on my wallet depending on the season, but I already had more orders for the games we had made for our winter handiwork, and if the picture books continued to sell well then I would be perfectly fine.

“They both worked hard over the winter, didn’t they? If I only picked one of them to be my attendant then it would be hard to ask the other to help again. Ultimately, I think it would be best to take them both on at once.”

“I do not believe you need to concern yourself with the feelings of gray shrine maidens, Sister Myne.” Rosina gave a bemused smile, but there was a big difference between living in the orphanage and living as an attendant. It would be hard to pick just one while knowing that.

“It will be easier to rest with them as your attendants instead of Delia,” Fran interjected. “Shall I go and summon them?”

“Please do. They have no experience as attendants, so the faster we get them involved the more time we will have to train them. Fran, will you be available to teach them?”

I wanted them to learn their duties before the Italian restaurant opened and took most of our kitchen staff, but Rosina was too concerned about hurting her fingers to be a proper example for cleaning. Either Fran or Gil would need to teach them, but that would be a lot harder to arrange if Fran didn’t have the time.

“Now that I can entrust paperwork to Rosina, I will have enough time.”

“Then contact Wilma and we can go to the orphanage tomorrow.”

We settled our plans for tomorrow, and at that moment there was a knock on the door. My attendants would come in at will without knocking, while temple residents like the High Priest and his attendants used a bell. The only people

who knocked were Lutz and Tuuli—people from the lower city.

“Is that Lutz? He’s a bit early today.” Not much time had passed since fifth bell. I went to the stairs and peered down at the first floor while Fran walked down the steps to welcome the visitor.

Damuel opened the door with a tense expression. Lutz was there, as expected, but Tuuli was actually there with him.

“Please, come in.” Fran gestured the two of them inside, and as the door was being shut behind them I heard Gil yell “Hold on a sec!” from somewhat far away. Fran waited with the door open for a bit until Gil eventually came running inside, gasping for breath.

“Tuuli, what happened?”

“We came to get you, Myne. Let’s go home together.” Tuuli smiled as she watched me race down the steps. “Things are dangerous right now, aren’t they? I’ll protect you, Myne!” she declared while thumping her chest.

Gil planted his feet firmly on the ground and puffed out his own chest as if competing with her. “I’ll protect you Sister Myne! I’m your attendant!”

“I appreciate the enthusiasm, you two, but I think this will just make things harder for my bodyguard.” I looked up at Damuel, who would need to guard all of us kids, and he gave an exasperated shrug.

“...Yeah, the more people there are for me to protect, the more dangerous it gets.”

“Right? Please forgive them just this once, Sir Damuel. Tuuli didn’t know.”

There was no going back now that they had all arrived. It was a bit sooner than expected, but I decided to go home with everyone. Rosina helped me change and quickly prepared for my departure.

“Fran, please send word to the orphanage. I will be hurrying home now.”

“Understood. I await your safe return.”

We left the temple, walking down the street with Lutz and Gil in front, me and Tuuli behind them, and Damuel behind us.

“I appreciate the thought, Tuuli, but you really shouldn’t walk me home like this,” I warned.

“Why not?”

“If something dangerous happens, Sir Damuel will have to focus on protecting me. He may not be able to protect us both at once if you’re here with us.” Damuel may have been a knight, but he couldn’t do everything. And naturally, he was here to guard me, not her; my safety would be his priority in an emergency, and there was no guarantee he would be able to save Tuuli if anything happened. He might have to abandon her while fleeing with me, and worst-case scenario she might be taken as a hostage to be used against us.

“If anything, you’re in more danger here than I am.”

“...Okay.” Tuuli puffed out her cheeks and frowned at me, pouting. I knew that she wanted to say she could protect me too, but not even her cute face would change the facts. Me being in danger was one thing, but I couldn’t let Tuuli put herself at risk like this.

We passed through the central plaza and headed south to Craftsman’s Alley, then took a turn that would lead us home. We headed down a side path with fewer people than the main road, and there we saw Otto, of all people. He was holding a spear and looking around as he walked, entirely as if patrolling the city.

“Hi, Otto. It’s been a while.”

“Myne!” Otto’s face lit up the second he saw me. “I’m glad you’re safe. Seriously. Now I don’t have to worry about the captain beating me to death.”

The fact that this was his reaction to seeing me was more than a little unsettling. Had he done something that would encourage Dad to beat him to death?

“...Otto, what did you do?”

“Hey, it wasn’t me. It was the commander of the east gate and the guards on duty,” Otto replied with a shrug. Apparently he had been inside doing paperwork when the guards standing at the gate and the commander made some mistake that would be worthy of Dad beating them to death; he had just

been sent out here to try and clean up their mess. “It happened this afternoon, when the captain contacted the commanders of every other gate and went to the center of town to tell them something important.”

“Wha?” I widened my eyes. That important something was probably the fact that the archduke was absent and there would be no new permits given. I had a really bad feeling about what was coming next.

According to Otto, despite Dad being on afternoon shift, he had gone to work at the east gate long before it was time to switch shifts. He immediately went to the commander, explained the circumstances, and had him organize a meeting with the other commanders in the center of the city. There he told them what Damuel had told him—that the archduke was absent and that there might be forged permits—before returning to the east gate.

“By the time the captain came back, they had already let a noble’s carriage train through. The commander of the east gate hadn’t told the guards anything, so they never even considered that the permit might be fake. The captain only learned of their mistake when it was time for his shift. He blasted the heck out of the commander for not telling all of the guards what he’d said, then ran off to the temple to make sure you were okay. You didn’t see him there?”

I instinctively looked up at Damuel, more concerned about the fact that a noble’s carriage train had been let inside than the fact I had missed Dad on the way here. His eyes were open wide in disbelief.

“They let carriages through?! Don’t tell me, was it the same noble from the other day?”

“Yep. You sure know a lot—it was the one and the same. Right now all the guards at the east gate are looking for them, but nobody’s found them. Maybe they’re already in the Noble’s Quarter? I would have thought that knights at the north gate would have caught them there, though,” Otto wondered aloud. It seemed that despite the archduke having forbidden the entry of nobles from outside the city into the duchy, not all soldiers shared the same sense of danger and urgency.

“You contacted the Knight’s Order, didn’t you?!” Damuel shouted, his eyebrows shooting up in anger, but Otto put a hand on his chin and had to think

before answering.

“...Who knows? Maybe the commander did. The captain ran off straight away, so maybe they don’t know yet.”

“You should have reported this immediately, fool!” Damuel immediately took out his shining wand as he yelled at Otto for his lack of urgency. He ignored Otto—who was murmuring “Huh? Wait, you’re a noble?” after seeing the wand appear out of thin air—and shot the red light signaling a call for aid into the air.



The knights should be coming now, I thought to myself in relief while looking up at the red light shooting upward—only to see Tuuli disappear out of the corner of my eye.

“Wha? Tuu—” Before I could even turn around, something prickly covered my face and made my vision go dark. I felt myself be lifted into the air, then started bouncing up and down. “Eek?!”

I could tell from the arms wrapped around my legs and back that someone had picked me up and started running. In a panic, I tried flailing about, but the best I could do while restrained was just weakly hit my hands against whatever rough thing was covering me. Judging by the streaks of light poking through the holes in the cloth in front of my face, I could guess that they had pulled a bag over me then picked me up.

“H-Help...”

“Myne! Tuuli!”

“Give them back!”

I heard Lutz and Damuel yell behind the veil of darkness, with several pairs of footsteps racing after me. Tuuli had been kidnapped as well; I could hear what sounded like her screaming. Given that the bustle of the main street was growing fainter, the kidnapper was probably running the opposite way down the alley.

“Captain! Myne’s in that bag!”

“LET GO OF MY DAUGHTER!”

I heard Otto yell, then my Dad roar with anger, and suddenly my body was spinning through the air. I assumed the kidnapper had thrown me aside to defend against Dad’s attack. In the darkness I couldn’t tell what was happening, and could do nothing as I hit the stone ground and rolled across it.

“Ow!”

“Myne!”

“Sister Myne!”

Just as I heard Lutz and Gil let out panicked cries, the bag was tugged, forcing me to sit up. I blinked in the darkness, and seconds later the bag was ripped off, giving me my vision back. The sudden brightness made me squint.

I kept sitting on the ground, looking around as I tried to adjust to the light again. Lutz and Gil peered at me while Damuel scanned the area, standing protectively by my side. Behind him to the right was Dad, his spear drawn, and Otto.

“Where’s Tuuli?!”

“Over there,” Gil replied, his eyes full of anger and frustration. I followed where he was looking and saw Tuuli being held hostage—a man had a knife at her throat and was backing away to escape. Tuuli, her eyes locked on the knife, was frozen in terror.

“N-No...” she choked out, the blood draining from her face as she trembled, tears welling up in her eyes.

All of the mana inside me immediately boiled over, coursing through my body. In a single instant, something inside of me snapped like a twig.

“Myne?!”

“Sister Myne?!”

I slowly stood up. My body was hot enough to boil water, but my mind was as cool and composed as an icy river. I had spent about a year in the temple offering my mana on a regular basis, including during a large-scale ritual, and apparently I had gotten much better at controlling my mana than I thought. The Crushing that had hit all those in eyesight back when I was furious at the High Bishop could now be directed at a single target—my instincts made me certain of that.

“Hey. What do you think you’re doing to my Tuuli?” I asked, glaring at the man pressing his knife against Tuuli’s neck.

His face immediately changed. Before it had been red with anger and adrenaline, but now it was a darkish purple as though he had been stopped from breathing. He tried to twist out of the way of my Crushing, but he could barely move at all. His face stiffened, eyes wide open.

“Get your dirty hands off of Tuuli and get out of my sight or else she won’t be the one dying here—you will.” The world around me slowed, and as the man began to convulse and foam at the mouth, I gradually strengthened the force of the mana hitting him more and more.

“Ngh... Ah!” His mouth moved, and a second later something sharp whistled through the air and stabbed through the man’s arm.

“What?” I blinked in surprise, coming back to my senses just as Dad leapt at the man, dagger in hand. Unable to dodge due to the Crushing’s lingering influence, the kidnapper took the blade head on.

“Gah!” He screamed as blood spurted from his wound. Dad then pushed him down, and Tuuli went tumbling down to the ground as they fought.

“Tuuli!”

“Are you okay?!”

Gil and Lutz immediately ran over to Tuuli, wiping the man’s splattered blood off of her cheeks.

“...I-I was so scared,” Tuuli said, sitting on the ground in shock.

I started to run over too, but just as I took my first step I saw something flash in the corner of my eye. I spun around and saw that the other man—the one my dad had been fighting with, and probably the one who had tried kidnapping me—was raising his hand. There was a ring on his finger, and its feystone was glowing. I instantly understood that he was pouring mana into it and did the first thing I could think of. I turned to Dad, who was finishing off the other man, and yelled.

“Dad! Look out!”

Dad spun around too, and Damuel roared “Gunther! Get back!” as he leapt toward him to push him away.

“Ngh?! ”

Once he had pushed Dad away, a shield-like thing appeared over Damuel’s left hand which he used to block the beam of mana that had shot toward him. The man must not have considered that his attack might be blocked as he

looked at Damuel and stepped back, shaken.

“Gunther, this guy has mana. I’ll take care of him! You all get back to the temple and alert Lord Ferdinand!”

“Understood! Otto, get Myne!” Dad yelled before picking up Tuuli, whose legs were too shaky for her to stand, and sprinting toward the main street. Having snapped back to their senses, Lutz and Gil ran after him. Otto picked me up and followed too, heading back to the temple.

“Myne, you’re bleeding...” Otto grimaced in sympathetic pain as he ran. I followed his eyes to my knees, where blood was flowing all the way to my shins.

“That must have happened when I was dropped.” It hadn’t hurt at all thanks to the adrenaline, but the second I saw the wound, a sudden sharp pang of pain hit me. My own blood reminded me of the blood that had sprayed from the other man.

“...Otto, this is a bad situation where, um, we need help really bad, right?” I asked, watching Dad, Lutz, and Gil weaving through the flood of people on the main street. Otto basically shrieked in response.

“What else does it look like?!”

“I just wanted to make sure nobody would get mad if I called for help.”

I pressed my thumb against the bloody wound on my knee, then pulled out the necklace I had made sure to wear at all times so that I could stamp my blood against its black, onyx-like stone.

For an instant, it shone with yellow light, but nothing else happened; the only change was the yellow flame that now wavered inside the black stone. It had probably sent word to Sylvester, or was just a magic tool to broadcast my location. I had no way of knowing despite having stamped my blood on it.

“What’s that thing?”

“A charm. Apparently it’ll help me when I’m in danger.” I slid the magic necklace back under my clothes, still not knowing what it had done. And that was when we passed by the Gilberta Company.

“Tuuli and Lutz, you go inside with Otto and stay at his place,” Dad instructed

while setting Tuuli down in front of the door. Lutz looked up at him, gasping for air.

“Mr. Gunther, I can—”

“You’ll get in the way.” Dad shot Lutz down before he could ask to come with us.

“But Gil is going!”

“Gil lives in the temple. You’re different. We don’t need people who can’t fight,” Dad said, slicing Lutz’s hopes to shreds before turning to Otto and giving him a hard look as I was set down. “Otto, I’m entrusting Tuuli to you. I’m taking Myne to the temple.”

“Captain, Myne—be careful out there, okay?” Otto clenched a fist and bent his elbow. Dad did the same, tapping his fist against Otto’s.

“It’ll be fine; the Knight’s Order is out.” His expression still hard, Dad pointed his fist upward. We could see several feystone highbeasts racing through the sky, probably heading to where Damuel was. If so, they would reach him in no time.

“Let’s go, Myne.” Dad picked me up and started sprinting to the temple.

The Noble from Another Duchy

Dad reached the temple with me in his arms, and for some reason Fran was already waiting at the gate. Why was he there when we hadn't had the time to tell him we were coming back?

"Fran? What brings you to the gate? Did something happen?"

"I saw the call for the Knight's Order pierce the sky, and considered it possible that you would be returning soon. To think I would be right..." Fran said, looking us over. He could guess that something serious had happened by the fact that Lutz and Tuuli weren't with me, and Dad was here in Damuel's place.

"Fran, we need to talk to the High Priest."

"He is not here."

"What...?"

"We can talk in your chambers. Gil, my apologies, but please wait here for Sir Damuel. I ask that you instruct him to go not to the High Priest's room, but to Sister Myne's chambers."

Upon arriving in my chambers, Fran poured a glass of water for Dad, who had just sprinted across the whole city carrying me. We then moved to the hall to talk. Fran was the first one to speak, doing so in a quiet voice.

"I will begin from when you and the others left, Sister Myne."

It hadn't been long after I had started being escorted home that Dad had arrived at my chambers. He said that the noble from before had entered the city, asking Fran to report that to the High Priest before sprinting back to the city to check that I was okay.

"I hurried to the High Priest's room to tell him what had happened but, unfortunately, Arno informed me that he was absent. With no other options available I decided to return to your chambers, but I was stopped by Delia on the way."

“Delia? Did she have some business with you?”

“She said that Dirk’s adoptive father had arrived and wished to discuss Dirk’s health with you, since you had raised him, but I sent her away as you had already left. I was relieved that you were not here while the High Priest was absent, but...” Fran frowned at me as if expressing his frustration that I had returned, but I wouldn’t have any of that.

“A lot happened to me too.”

I told Fran exactly what had happened on my way home. He crossed his arms and fell into thought.

“If we consider both sides of this story, it is possible that the High Priest was summoned by the Knight’s Order. He will likely return when Sir Damuel does. The archduke is always accompanied by a group of knights when visiting the Sovereignty, so there is no mistaking that the Knight’s Order is lacking in manpower right now,” he murmured. “Sister Myne, please change into your blue robes before Sir Damuel arrives.”

I put on my robes with the help of a worried-looking Rosina, and it wasn’t too long after that Gil returned with Damuel; the Knight’s Order had contained the disturbance in the lower city and instructed him to return to his guard duty. Fran gave them both water, then explained the circumstances in the temple.

“...That’s strange,” Damuel muttered in confusion. “I didn’t see Lord Ferdinand among the other knights—they even told me to report this to him. Are you sure he’s not here?”

We were all confused by this revelation, and so decided to try visiting the High Priest’s room once more. At the very least, we would have to interrogate Arno as to where he had gone; Damuel made it clear that the situation was bad enough to demand that level of drastic action.

“Apprentice, hold onto this.” Damuel, as if suddenly remembering he had it, took a ring out of a small pouch on his hip and placed it in my hand. It had a small, slightly murky gem attached to it. “This is evidence I got off of the man from before. See the noble’s family crest on it?”

“I shouldn’t have something this important!”

“It’s small and not that high in quality, but it’s got a feystone. Hold onto it in case something happens. Unlike Lord Ferdinand, I don’t have any decent feystones I can lend to you.”

Apparently, as a noble on the poorer end of the spectrum, Damuel didn’t have enough feystones to be able to lend one to someone else. I put the ring on, figuring that it would be better than nothing, even if it did belong to a criminal. It didn’t change size to fit my finger, perhaps because it wasn’t a magic tool like the ring the High Priest would always give me.

“...It might be broken. The crest is all we need for evidence, and there’s no point in putting it on if you can’t use it. Can you put mana in it?” Damuel asked.

I tried pouring mana into the ring. “Umm, it looks like I can. Just a bit.” Likewise, unlike the ring the High Priest always lent me, I could barely put any of my mana into the ring.

“That’s a low-quality stone. It might shatter if you put too much mana into it at once. Be careful.”

I clenched my fist so as to not let the half-broken ring slip off of my finger as Fran prepared to take us to the High Priest’s room. I was positioned directly behind him, with Dad and Damuel on either side of me.

“Gil, watch over my chambers for me.” As a child with no fighting experience, he would be staying behind. He had been taught his whole life that violence was wrong, and the shock of seeing someone killed in a spray of blood today had really gotten to him. He looked sick and it was obvious that he wasn’t in a good state of mind, but as much as I wanted to stay with him, that simply wasn’t an option right now. So we left the room, a stiff-faced Gil seeing us off.

“Sister Myne, please be careful. Please.”

We entered the noble area of the temple just as the High Bishop and a group of people turned into the same hallway. Beside the plump-bellied High Bishop was an ugly, toad-like man who was just as overweight. He wore different clothes, but he was the spitting image of an evil minister or some other politician. They were followed by gray shrine maidens and some plainly dressed servants, bringing their party up to about ten people.

Fran smoothly turned a nearby corner to avoid the High Bishop's group, taking us into a hallway that led to the Noble's Gate. It would be a long detour to the High Priest's room, but that was better than meeting the High Bishop along the way. Dad picked me up, Damuel scanned the area, and Fran led the way as we power walked to the High Priest's room.

"Sir Damuel, who was that with the High Bishop?"

"Count Bindewald. He's the archnoble from another duchy who used a forged permit to enter the city. We can guess he's here for you," whispered Damuel in a quiet voice, causing Dad to tighten his arms around me. "We might be able to catch him if the Knight's Order or even Lord Ferdinand were here, but I don't stand a chance alone. He's of a much higher status than me and has much more mana. He may not know how to fight like we knights do, but that doesn't matter when he can just overwhelm me with mana."

The door closest to the Noble's Gate came into view. We turned the corner to head to the High Priest's room, only to see the High Bishop's party blocking the hallway; we had intended to avoid them, but they had seen us and backtracked to get here first.

"Count Bindewald, that is the blue apprentice shrine maiden, Myne," the High Bishop said with a nasty grin and a finger pointed at me. Bindewald's lips twisted into a frog-like smile as he looked me over from head to toe.

"Ohoho, I see..."

His disgusting gaze sent goosebumps all over my skin, and I subconsciously squeezed Dad tighter. I honestly deserved praise for holding back my urge to shout "Don't look at me!"

"Hmm. We were told she had left, but here she returns to her guardians. I suppose they failed, then. Useless fools," Bindewald muttered in a frustrated tone before extending a hand my way. "Myne, I shall grace you with a contract."

"...I respectfully refuse. I am already promised to someone."

"Hmph. You may be in his custody, but I imagine you've signed no contract. All I need to do is get your blood on one first." The toad let out a disturbing

cackle, and his stomach bounced as he took a step forward.

“Are you going to adopt Sister Myne too, Count Bindewald?” Delia, stepping out from behind the High Bishop with Dirk in her arms, spoke in a bright tone ill befitting the situation. “How wonderful, she and Dirk will be one big happy family. They’ll both be graced with the blessings of the nobility.”

The toad snorted derisively at Delia’s words. “Me? Adopt a filthy commoner? Never.”

“But sir, you already adopted Dirk.”

“I did not adopt him. What I have with that baby is a submission contract.” The count cackled and took out what looked like a proper adoption contract, but across its title one could see there were two layers of parchment. A broad smile spread across his face, he peeled off the front layer to reveal the text beneath: *Submission Contract for a Devouring Child*.

“What? Does that mean... Dirk will...”

“He will be kept as a slave for the rest of his life and used as a living source of mana to charge magic tools for Bindewald,” I said.

Delia squeezed Dirk tighter and shook her head in fear before desperately looking at the High Bishop. “That can’t be true! Sh-She’s lying, isn’t she, High Bishop? You said Dirk and I would be staying together, didn’t you?”

“Fear not, Delia. The baby’s mana will be used for our sake, but he will be raised here in the temple. He will not be taken from you,” the High Bishop said in a gentle tone, his face that of a kindly grandfather. “This is merely a trade. I will keep that baby, and in return Myne will leave the temple.”

Delia paled, looking between Dirk and I. “Sister Myne will leave the temple in Dirk’s stead...?” she murmured in disbelief.

Then, a fat belly blocked her from view. “This is your submission contract. Sign it. You have made me lose many of my pawns, both today and in the spring. You will be filling the hole left by them yourself.”

The count took a step forward, and we all took a step back. The door to the High Priest’s room—and perhaps our only hope of being rescued—was behind

them.

“High Priest...” I whispered.

The High Bishop smirked. “Unfortunately, your guardian, the High Priest, is absent. No cavalry will be coming to your aid. Give up already, so that I never have to set my eyes on you again.” He turned to look at the toad standing a few steps in front of him. “Count Bindewald, with both the archduke and the High Priest gone, this is our best opportunity—you may take Myne and I will pretend I saw nothing. Capture her and leave the city as soon as you can.”

At those words, the tension in the air grew thick. Dad carefully set me down, took one step forward, and readied his spear. Damuel readied his weapon as well, clenching his teeth in preparation of facing a noble more powerful and of a higher status than him. Even Fran took out a dagger from the pouch on his hip.

“...You can kill everyone but the girl. Get her.” On the frog’s command, three men from their group stepped forward. They all carried themselves like the man Dad had killed, and they were like living examples of what happened to people with the Devouring who signed with nobles.

“Apprentice, get back!” Damuel blocked two of the men who jumped at us while Dad and Fran handled the other one. The count’s personal soldiers weren’t as capable as Damuel, a formally trained knight; it took them longer to build up mana for simple attacks and they weren’t able to fight as well as him. But taking on two people at once was still difficult, and while Damuel was just barely managing, one wrong move could cost him his life.

Dad and Fran seemed like they should have been able to dominate the other guy, but since they had no defense against mana, it wasn’t as simple as that. Dad would have won in no time had it just been a sword fight, but there was nothing a commoner could do when attacked with mana. The man’s ring lit up, and just as a beam was shot toward Dad and Fran, Damuel whipped out his wand and swung. A sharp noise like the clash of metal rang out as mana deflected mana.

“That’s a noble...?!”

The moment Damuel made his wand appear, both the toad and the High Bishop hardened their expressions. The High Bishop bore down on Delia, spittle

flying out of his mouth as he yelled.

“Delia! Who is that?!”

“The knight assigned to guard Sister Myne,” Delia squeaked out in a quiet voice, too scared to think straight.

The High Bishop’s eyes widened and he pointed at Damuel. “That shabby-looking man is a knight?!”

The High Priest must have been hiding information from him; although the High Bishop knew I had been assigned a guard, he didn’t know that Damuel was a noble, nor that he was a knight, and the fact that he was still wearing his plain clothes for visiting the lower city had made that even harder to guess.

“We won’t have much time if the Knight’s Order is alerted. I will have to make him disappear as well.” The count had previously just been watching with a grin, but now poured mana into his ring with a grim expression before whipping his hand through the air. A light-blue ball of mana shot out of his ring, heading straight for Damuel.

“Look out!” I swung my hand as well, copying his motions. A whitish ball of mana shot out, hitting the count’s glowing blue mana and knocking it away. His mana struck the wall with a loud bang, but the wall itself was completely unscathed, as though it had just absorbed the mana.

“How dare a Devouring commoner oppose me?” the count said frustratedly, putting even more mana into his ring. I watched his hands carefully and did the same, taking care not to pour so much mana into my ring that it would break. The most I could do with a ring this weak was send a small burst of mana that would knock his mana off course. And yet I had to do something—Damuel was busy with two men already and didn’t have the leeway to do anything about the count.

...This is a lot better than physical combat, at least. If Bindewald leapt at me or came swinging I would lose in an instant, but in a mana duel I could at least buy some time.

“Just how long will you last using a pathetic amount of mana like that?” The count let out another toad-like cackle, launching ball after ball of mana at me,

like a lion teasing a small animal.

“Eek!” I knocked them away using as little mana as possible, so as to not break the crappy ring on my finger. Damuel, Dad, and Fran were all busy fighting the people in front of them; the power balance would crumble in an instant if Bindewald started launching mana at them. Losing wasn’t an option, and realizing that made my breathing harder and cold, anxious sweat start running down my back.

“Hmph...” After knocking away so many balls of mana that I lost count, Bindewald stopped launching them and glared at me with disgust. I had probably lasted longer than he expected.

...I can keep going. Clenching my fist so that the loose ring wouldn’t fall off, I eyed Bindewald head on. It was then that his eyes fell on my ring.

“Hm...? What’s that I spy? To think you were already wearing a submission ring. Aha, what a joke. There was never any need to bother with this; I’ve already won.”

Bindewald burst into laughter. I was apparently wearing a ring given to those with the Devouring who had signed a submission contract which, once worn, made them unable to attack their master. Furthermore, it couldn’t be removed until their master—in this case, Count Bindewald—voided their contract. The rings were vile; the master could pour his own mana into them to inflict pain on any slave who disobeyed him.

Bindewald gave a smug cackle and looked down at me. “Obey me if you don’t want to suffer!”

I took the ring off right before his eyes. It probably wasn’t functioning as intended since we hadn’t signed a contract and it was already half-broken. “Just saying, it comes right off.”

“What?!” The toad widened his eyes. Behind him, the High Bishop’s balding head was bright red with anger.

“Insolent girl!” he shouted before ripping Dirk out of Delia’s hands.

“Ah!” It happened so suddenly that Delia could do nothing but stare, her eyes wide as the High Bishop forcefully drained mana out of Dirk using a feystone.

The baby's face paled, and he started convulsing in the High Bishop's tight grip.

"Dirk!" Delia screamed, reaching out to take him back. But the High Bishop just clicked his tongue and knocked Delia's hands away.

"...Babies never have enough mana," he snorted after finishing stealing mana from Dirk. He then swung his hand and shot out a ball of mana. I hurriedly put the ring back on and deflected the shot, then glared at the High Bishop with clenched teeth.

"How *dare* you do that to Dirk!" Anger filled my entire body. But before I could Crush him, the High Bishop thrust the now-limp and exhausted Dirk out in front of him.



“Hmph! Are you capable of attacking this baby? Do you have it in you to ruin Delia’s life?”

“Stop! Sister Myne, please stop! I’m begging you!” Delia screamed in terror, her face contorting miserably as she saw Dirk being used as a human shield. I couldn’t Crush anyone with her begging desperately like that.

I sucked in an anxious gulp of air, not knowing what to do. And then it happened—one of the High Bishop’s shrine maidens grabbed me from the side, having stealthily walked over while everyone was distracted.

“Eek?!”

“Myne?!”

“Yes! Good job, Jenni! Keep holding her down!” the High Bishop exclaimed before throwing the limp Dirk at Delia. I could see Delia crying and hugging Dirk out of the corner of my eye.

“Let go of me!” I screamed at the shrine maiden.

“No. While I was taken in by the High Bishop and forced to offer flowers day by day, Rosina and Wilma were taken in by you and allowed to experience the comfort we once had under Sister Christine. That is simply not something I can forgive.”

Jenni’s singsong whispers were tinged with sweetness, but the seething hatred hidden beneath it all sent an icy chill down my back. If I was taken away from the temple, Rosina and Wilma would be sent back to the orphanage. Jenni wanted nothing more than for them to be miserable there, and I knew there was nothing I could say that would make her let go of me.

“We can consider the contract done then,” Bindewald said with a throaty laugh. He started walking this way. Jenni’s grip didn’t loosen no matter how much I struggled. She was lithe with slender arms, but a weak child like myself couldn’t even come close to overpowering an adult woman’s grip.

Bindewald took out his shining wand and turned it into a knife. The look in his eyes as he brandished it was the spitting image of how Shikza had looked at me; they were the eyes of a noble who believed that, as a commoner, I was inferior

to him, and that me submitting to him was the proper way of the world.

All I could do was tremble in fear, just like I had when Shikza had pulled a knife on me. The tip of the glowing blade grew close, then cut my fingertip.

“Ow!” Unlike the shallow cuts Lutz would make for blood stamps, Bindewald had dug deep into my finger, paying no mind to any pain or lasting damage. Blood almost instantly began to seep from the wound.

“Open your hand.” He took out a contract and pushed it toward me, wearing a nasty grin all the while. His toad-like face only got more disgusting as he came up close to me. I glared at him, squeezing my hand shut as hard as I could in defiance, but there was no stopping the blood from dripping out.

“I told you to open your hand.” I flailed about, trying to avoid him grabbing my hand and wrenching it open. I was weak enough that it would be over as soon as his hands were on mine.

“No, no, no! Go away! Ow!”

“LET GO OF HER!” I heard a roar, and a second later Dad kicked Jenni from behind as hard as he could. The sheer force sent us both flying toward Bindewald. I slammed into his fat belly, knocking us all onto the ground, and for a second I couldn’t breathe, squashed between Jenni and him as I was.

Within seconds, Dad raced over and pulled me out from between them before picking me up and holding me in one arm. “Sorry about that, Myne. Did I make it in time?” he asked, not looking at me. He pulled Jenni up a bit with his free hand as she gasped for air, then kicked up into her stomach. She flew off Bindewald with a gurgle, vomit spewing from her mouth.

“Th-That was just cruel...” muttered the High Bishop. Both he and his attendants were trembling at the sight of violence that was never normally seen in the temple.

Dad gave them a cold look. “So you’re saying it’s not cruel to stab a little girl with a knife and force her into a slave contract she doesn’t agree to?”

“S-Silence, commoner!” Bindewald, whose face was bright red in humiliation as he sat up on the floor, angrily swung his ringed hand. He shot out a larger blast of mana than ever before, and the massive ball of shining blue mana came

right for us. It was too close for me to launch my own blast of mana to deflect it.

...I'm dead! I squeezed my eyes shut as the ball shot toward me, but Dad was braver. He grabbed me in a hug and immediately leapt to the side, rolling as he hit the floor.

"Ngh!"

"Dad?!" He hadn't completely dodged the mana attack. His left shoulder down to his elbow was bright red, as though he had been burnt. The sight of him groaning in pain flipped a switch inside of me.

I rolled out of Dad's arms and stood up. I locked my eyes on Bindewald, who was building up mana for a second attack, and hit him with all my mana from the very start.

"I *WILL* make you pay!" I shouted, and the force of all of the mana in my body made the feystone on the ring burst apart like a popped balloon. In the same moment, the full force of my Crushing hit Bindewald; he blinked in surprise and fell to his knees, eyes wide open in surprise. He tried to move his trembling hands, only to find he couldn't move them at all, as if heavy weights were crushing his body from all sides. I had no intention of letting him do anything else.

"Count Bindewald?!" The High Bishop's panicked voice sent my head turning toward him in a glare. I wasn't scared of him now that he had given up his human shield.

But the second after that thought passed through my mind, he took out a black feystone from the pocket of his robes. "Don't think the same trick will work on me twice!"

The black feystone in his hands was sucking my mana right out of the air. He gave a smug smirk. I kept Crushing him with mana, but it was all sucked straight into the stone.

"Ngh... I let my guard down. To think she had that much mana in her," Bindewald said. I saw him staggering to his feet out of the corner of my eye before making his wand appear, his scornful smile replaced by a completely blank expression.

The Black Charm

“Apprentice!” Damuel, a panicked expression on his face, took out his shining wand and stood between the count and me. As he protected my right side with a red light, I continued pouring mana into the High Bishop’s stone as his face twisted with smug assurance in his own victory.

“You waste your time,” he said, barking a laugh.

But a second later the black feystone made a popping sound, and a sliver of yellow light started to shine through it. A crack ran across the feystone’s smooth surface, then another.

“...What?” the High Bishop murmured in shock. I ignored him, glaring intently at the feystone as I continued to pour mana into it. The black feystone was turning yellow before my eyes. “...What’s going on?!”

The black faded, and for a brief moment combined with the yellow inside the feystone to make it look gold. A dazzlingly bright flash shone through the many thin cracks, and then the feystone began to crumble like sand. The High Bishop watched the golden dust slip through his fingers, his lips trembling and his eyes wider than ever before as he struggled to believe what he had just witnessed. Meanwhile, I continued Crushing him with mana.

“Myne, what in the world *are* y— Ngh!” The High Bishop glared at me with bloodshot eyes, then immediately clutched his chest and started coughing blood as my Crushing hit him head on. I started to pile on more mana, but then heard Damuel grunt in pain.

I spun toward him and saw that he was kneeling on the ground, having been hit hard by one of Bindewald’s balls of mana. He must have lost even the strength to grip his shining wand as it fell from his hand and disappeared into thin air. Damuel slowly bent forward, as if following it down, then collapsed onto the ground.

“Sir Damuel?!” I raced over to him. His breathing was ragged and he had

fallen unconscious. Not even calling out his name woke him up—all he did was groan.

“Hmph. What kind of pathetic knight can’t even withstand a mana strike of that size?” the toad sneered, letting out a snort.

Damuel was defenseless while he was unconscious. I looked around for help, and saw that of the three Devouring soldiers on the High Bishop’s side, only one was still standing—and even he was just barely staying upright. But this third man was quickly taken care of as Dad grabbed his head and slammed it into the ground like he was dunking a basketball, and his eyes rolled back in his head as he fell unconscious. Dad then sped my way, guarding his limp left arm.

“Myne!”

“Dad...”

Fran had been injured during the fight, and was gasping for air while slumped against the door leading to the Noble’s Gate; the High Bishop was kneeling on the ground and coughing up more blood as his attendant gray shrine maidens skittered around nervously; and Delia was hugging the limp Dirk, frozen in place. The only ones still standing largely unhurt were the count and me.

All of a sudden, in the midst of all the chaos, the door to the High Priest’s room opened. Out stepped the High Priest, despite the fact that he was said to have been absent. His eyes widened at the disaster area in the hallway.

“What in the world happened here?!” Anyone would have been surprised to leave their room to find a bunch of injured people sprawled out on the ground, some of them looking like corpses. But the biggest question I had was why he hadn’t noticed us sooner given all of the noise we had been making right outside his door. That was the most confusing thing about the whole situation.

“High Priest, I am certain that Arno said you were absent! Why are you here?!” the High Bishop demanded, his voice almost a shriek. The High Priest looked at him, completely unfazed.

“I believe that should be self-evident: I told Arno to inform any visitors that I was absent. Since I was in fact not in my room proper, that was not a lie.” That no doubt meant he had been hunkered down in his lecture room. It was

completely sealed off from the outside room using mana, which explained why he hadn't heard us.

The High Priest scanned the hallway, taking in all that he saw. He narrowed his eyes a bit when I met his gaze, so I hid behind Dad. It was probably obvious that I had let my mana run loose.

As I swallowed hard, trembling in fear of being tied to a chair and lectured about the terrors of boiling skin, the High Priest rubbed his temple and turned to the High Bishop. "That is enough about me, High Bishop. I would like you to explain what has happened here. We seem to have a visitor who I've never seen before, and I have to ask who he is exactly."

The High Bishop made no attempt to answer the High Priest's question, and instead just pressed his lips together and glared back at him. The shining wand had already disappeared from Bindewald's hand, and he looked at the High Priest with the arrogant expression of a noble.

"Is there any need for me to give my name to a priest? I am here on proper authorization."

"I would like to see your permit."

"And why would I bother wasting my time dealing with the likes of a mere High Priest?"

I had thought that the High Priest was a fairly high-status noble from his dealings with the Knight's Order, but Bindewald was from another duchy and saw him as just another temple priest—High Priest or not. His arrogance was coming out in full force and, seemingly influenced by that, the High Bishop regained his own smug confidence. He stood up and wiped the blood from his mouth, his face contorting each time he coughed.

"High Priest, this is a noble from Ahrensbach. Don't tell me that you intend to cause a diplomatic incident while the archduke is gone."

"I believe you are the one who has caused a diplomatic incident. The archduke is absent for the Archduke Conference, which means he is not available to sign any permits for outsider nobles," the High Priest coldly replied.

The High Bishop faltered and looked around. When his eyes fell on me, his lips

curled into a nasty grin.

“H-He was given the permit far ahead of time. Therefore, this incident is not my responsibility. Myne is the one who disturbed the peace of the temple and attacked a noble. If anyone is responsible for this, it is her. Arrest her at once under the charge of defying the nobility.” The High Bishop pointed a hateful finger at me as he attempted to shift the blame, then coughed up more blood. He looked between his hand and the splatter of blood on the floor. “J-Just look at this. She has attacked me not once, but twice. That is not something she would do without malice. She should bear *full* responsibility for this,” he snarled, spit flying out of his mouth.

Bindewald, nodding in agreement, backed the High Bishop up. “Indeed, and she attacked me as well. A mere commoner clad in blue robes beyond her means launched mana at *me*, a noble. Out of anyone, this child deserves punishment the most.” Bindewald pointed at me as well, then let out his disgusting croaky laugh. It was the same noble logic that Shikza had used: no commoner should ever, ever defy a noble.

“Now then, High Priest. Capture Myne. Ensure that she cannot use her mana,” the High Bishop demanded.

The High Priest gave a sigh before walking toward me. Dad squeezed my hand tightly as we watched him slowly approach, and I squeezed his back.

“I see that you let your mana rampage again, Myne.”

“There were extenuating circumstances.”

“So it seems,” the High Priest murmured as he looked down at me, his eyes sad and full of sympathy. More than anything, that showed that he wouldn’t be able to protect me.

“...High Priest, will I be punished for this?”

“You did attack the High Bishop and an outsider noble, after all. I imagine that you, your family, and all of your attendants will be executed.”

“I’m sorry, Dad...” I said while looking up at him.

Dad let out a short laugh. “I was prepared to die back when you first joined

the temple, and I'm prepared to die now. Don't sweat it." But I couldn't help but panic.

"If only I had gone all-out with my mana and killed both the High Bishop and that *toad* before the High Priest had come out. That would have gotten rid of all of the evidence," I said jokingly with a shrug.

The High Priest nodded, a brief flash of pain on his face. "Unfortunately, since you are both incompetent and incapable of properly finishing a job, it is too late for you to hide evidence now."

The High Priest was the most reliable of all the nobles I knew, and even he said he couldn't save me. It was hard to think of anybody else who would be able to help.

"In the end, Brother Sylvester's charm didn't help at all. I guess you can never trust a man who says he'll help you," I sighed as I pulled out the chained necklace charm from behind my robes. There was still a golden fire swaying within the black stone, but that was all. Just like Bindewald and the High Bishop had said, I would be executed for defying nobles as a mere commoner.

Brother Sylvester, you liar, I thought to myself while looking at the necklace.

The High Priest bent down to look at it. He stared at the stone for a solid second, then widened his eyes in disbelief. "Myne, where did you get this?"

"Brother Sylvester gave it to me as thanks for letting him go on a fun hunting trip in the lower city's forest. He said it's a charm."

"I see. That is quite the charm, I must say. It will make things a lot easier," the High Priest said, his flat expression now replaced with a slight smile. Apparently the charm was so powerful that the High Priest was confident he would be able to send both the High Bishop and Bindewald packing.

I'm sorry for doubting you and calling you a liar, Brother Sylvester.

As I internally thanked Sylvester, the High Priest slowly looked between Dad and I. "However, it will only be of use if you are prepared to steel your resolve."

I looked up at him. If there was a way to save my family and attendants, all those who had supported me up until now, then I was willing to do whatever it

took.

“Steel my resolve for what?”

“...Being adopted.”

“By Lord Karstedt? If so, I’ve already...”

Before I could finish my sentence, the High Priest shook his head to interrupt me. “Not Karstedt. Sylvester.”

My future adoptive father wouldn’t be the reliable Karstedt, but the unpredictable man-child Sylvester? The thought was so surprising that all I could do was look at the High Priest, my eyes wide and jaw dropped. For a second I thought he was joking, but his golden eyes were deadly serious.

...Sylvester’s adopted daughter? He was the kind of person to start poking my cheek on our first meeting and demand I chirp “pooey,” but I had met him enough times to know that he wasn’t a bad person. Not to mention, Sylvester had given me this charm because he wanted to protect me. If he actually could save both my family and my attendants, I wouldn’t mind becoming his adopted daughter.

“...I’m ready. If it means saving everyone, I’ll do it right away.”

“Myne!” Dad yelled with widened eyes, but I just shook my head.

“Sorry, Dad, but I want to protect everyone. I hope you can forgive me.”

“That is all I needed to hear,” the High Priest said, dropping a ring with a yellow stone slotted into it onto my palm. The stone was much larger and more transparent than the feystone of the evidence ring that had just broken; I could tell at a glance that it was much higher in quality.

“Myne, pray to Wind for protection. Pray to protect what you care about from my mana.”

“From your mana, High Priest?” I asked while looking up, and he flashed me an evil grin unlike any I had ever seen him make before.

“Yes. If that door over there is opened and mana spills out everywhere, it will be quite a pain to fix everything. Make a shield of wind around the door to stop that from happening. We now have justice on our side, Myne. It is best we use

this opportunity to eliminate those who oppose us.”

Apparently the High Priest had been extremely frustrated with the situation the High Bishop and the toad had put him in. I didn’t know what exactly had put justice on our side, but either way, he turned his back to me with an amused grin on his face before walking toward the both of them.

“High Priest, have you sealed Myne’s mana?” the High Bishop asked while peering my way.

“I gave her a magic tool,” the High Priest replied smoothly. The magic tool he had given me was for wielding mana, not sealing it, but the High Bishop interpreted that reply in the way that favored him the most. The tension drained from his Crushed body and he gave a cocky grin.

“Very good. I believe it is best that we entrust this dangerous criminal to Ahrensbach and allow them to remove her from this duchy.”

The High Priest summoned his wand with a sly smile, as if mocking the High Bishop for acting like his usual arrogant self. He then aimed his wand at him. It was a clear threat.

“Wh-What are you...?”

The High Priest chanted something as he swung his wand, which made beams of light shoot out from its tip and wrap around the High Bishop. He fell to the ground like a lifeless doll, then began gnashing his teeth.

“High Priest! What is the meaning of this?!”

“It would be inconvenient for you to die here. That is all.”

“...Die?” replied the High Bishop, stunned by the sudden violent word. The High Priest turned his back on him and faced Bindewald, who was pointing at the High Priest’s shining wand with clear panic in his eyes.

“Why does a mere priest have one of those?!”

“Because I am a noble who graduated from the Royal Academy, of course.” Apparently the shining wand was proof of having graduated from the Academy—something that a priest who had been raised in the temple would never be expected to have. It wasn’t something that nobles from other duchies would

know, but the High Priest hadn't been raised in the temple; he was a noble of high enough status that, when outside of the temple, the commander of the Knight's Order would bend the knee to him.

"Shall we duel, Count Bindewald?"

"Why do you know my name...?"

"How could I forget the name of the outsider noble who tried entering the city without the archduke's permission, only to be stopped by the Knight's Order?" The High Priest knew everything about the incident, including Bindewald's name and circumstances. As always, I couldn't help but be impressed by his diligence. It was good to have him as an ally.

"You may think that you will be safe as long as you can escape this duchy, but we now have justice on our side. I will not be letting you get away so easily."

"Justice, you say?"

I could feel the High Priest pouring his mana into his wand. Bindewald must have as well, since he stopped staring and hurriedly readied his own.

The High Priest was pouring such an immense amount of mana into his wand that I couldn't help but gasp. It dwarfed the pittance of mana that the toad had been using before.

"Dad, hurry and carry Sir Damuel to the door where Fran is!" I shouted, then dashed over to Fran myself. He winced and tried to stand up as I got closer. "Don't move, just sit still!" I hadn't been able to tell from afar, but Fran was covered in tiny cuts and bruises. "I'm sorry, Fran. Are you okay?"

"I am the one who should apologize—I was barely able to help you at all." There was no way that a gray priest untrained in battle and taught from birth that violence was wrong would be used to situations like this. It was my fault for getting him wrapped up in this in the first place.

"Don't be so hard on yourself. You managed to get a few cuts in without getting in my way. You've got good eyes on you; with some proper training, you'd make a good fighter," Dad assured Fran as he carried Damuel to the door.

I stepped forward protectively so that they would all be behind me, then

began praying while I poured mana into my ring. “O Goddess of Wind Schutzaria, protector of all. O twelve goddesses who serve by her side...” I envisioned a shield surrounding both us and the door as I continued. “Please hear my prayer and lend me your divine strength. Grant me your shield of wind, so that I might blow away those who mean to cause harm.”

With a sharp, metallic sound, a shield of wind appeared in the air.

“Myne...” Dad murmured, having never seen me use magic before. I kept my back to him and continued pouring mana into the wind shield.

I will protect them, no matter what!



The High Priest and Bindewald were still just pouring mana into their wands without firing any shots, but that alone was enough to cause sparks to fly in the air all around them. One hit the wind shield and popped in a tiny explosion.

“It’s okay. I’ll protect you all.”

Their swelling mana was in effect Crushing everything around them, and with no protection the High Bishop and his attendants lay on the ground trembling as sparks flew around them. In the midst of all that, Delia frantically began looking around for safety, Dirk held tightly in her arms. Upon seeing my wind shield, she stood up on wavering legs.

“Please, Sister Myne! Help! Please save Dirk!” she screamed in desperation. But I had my hands completely full pouring mana into my ring’s feystone to maintain the wind shield and hold back the immense amount of mana radiating from the High Priest and Bindewald. Protecting Dad, Fran, and the unconscious Damuel was my priority; I didn’t have the leeway to go and help Delia and Dirk.

“Come into the shield yourself if you want to be safe. I can’t move.”

Delia leaned forward to protect Dirk from the flying sparks, desperately dodging the Crushing waves as she made her way over. Her footsteps were heavy as though she was being pushed toward the ground.

“Sister Myne, you are going to help Delia?” Fran asked reproachfully.

I shook my head. “I don’t have the leeway to help her. But if she wants to get inside the shield herself, she’s free to do so.”

“But...” Fran continued before trailing off, dissatisfied.

I lowered my eyes. I could understand his disapproval, and I did remember that he had told me to cut Delia off entirely, but I didn’t think it was right to leave them to face the mana out there and let them die together. Dirk in particular was already on the verge of death, having been forced into a contract and then forcibly drained of mana. He wasn’t at fault here.

Once I explained this to Fran he swallowed his reproach, but there was still a pained look on his face. All he did was whisper, “Please don’t let her exploit you.”

Delia inched her way into the shield, then collapsed in exhaustion. But not even that was enough for her to let go of Dirk. As she sat with him in her arms, she looked up at me, her crimson hair fluttering behind her. “Thank you ever so much, Sister Myne.”

“Delia, I will allow you inside the shield because I do not wish for either of you to die. But that does not mean I have forgotten what you did. Please be aware of that.”

“...Of course.”

The High Bishop’s attendants saw that and seemed to think that even if I wouldn’t forgive them, I would at least spare their lives. “Sister Myne, may we please enter as well?” they said, each trudging over and wanting to enter the shield too.

“If you can enter, then certainly.”

“We thank you.”

But of the three who tried to enter the wind shield, only one was successful. The other two were blown back by the wind.

“Kyaah?!”

“Noo!”

Delia and the shrine maiden inside the shield both blinked as they watched the other two get blown away.

“But why...?”

“Those with ill intent can’t pass the shield.”

It wasn’t my fault they had been blown away; the shield fundamentally wouldn’t allow passage to anyone who meant harm to those within it. Those two shrine maidens had intended to harm either me, for hitting the High Bishop with mana; Dad, for hitting their fellow shrine maiden Jenni; or Delia and Dirk, possibly for entering the shield first. I wasn’t enough of a saint to try to save people who meant me or those close to me harm, nor did I have the time to care.

“It’s a shame they couldn’t enter, but that’s all there is to it,” I murmured

right as the High Priest spoke some words, his mana swelling immensely. Just as everything was about to explode, the door behind us creaked open.

“Kept ya waiting, huh Myne?” Sylvester said with a grin as he and Karstedt stepped out, just as mana shot out of the High Priest’s and Bindewald’s wands. “Wh-What the heck is going on?!” he yelped.

“Both of you, get inside the shield! And please shut the door!” I yelled as I watched two enormous beams of mana collide in front of my eyes.

The Source of Strife

Sylvester and Karstedt, exhibiting truly praiseworthy reaction times, shut the door and leapt behind the wind shield in the blink of an eye. I poured as much mana as I could into the shield to strengthen it; I had to protect everyone inside, no matter what.

The beams of mana that the High Priest and Bindewald had shot from their wands smashed together so hard that they began to surge around each other, excess energy whipping around. But there was an obvious difference in the size and power of their mana, and in no time at all the High Priest's mana overwhelmed Bindewald, pushing his beam back until it hit him and sent him flying. He slammed hard against the wall before falling to the ground with a thud. He was covered in burns just like Dad was, and rolled on the ground letting out pained groans that made him sound even more like a toad.

“Urr... Grurrrr...”

The High Bishop had survived thanks to the bands of light wrapped around him, but he was completely frozen, his eyes wide open. It must have been terrifying to see the huge beams of mana colliding right in front of him. The gray shrine maidens and collapsed Devouring soldiers, however, were nowhere to be seen; they had no means of protecting themselves from the explosion of mana that had erased them from existence.

“Myne, this is how you destroy evidence. Be thorough if you're going to do it. None of these people are supposed to be in here in the first place,” the High Priest said as he looked down at the toad with cold eyes and thrust out his wand without mercy. Bindewald squealed and crawled away as fast as he could, but the High Priest caught up in just a few steps. His lack of mercy was much appreciated when he was a friend, but I would never, ever want him as an enemy.

...The High Priest is kinda terrifying.

“Ferdinand, isn't that enough?” said Sylvester. “And Myne, get rid of the

shield. We don't need it anymore." He wasn't wearing the blue robes of a priest but rather a fancier outfit that one might expect a noble to wear. He stepped forward, whipping his bright yellow cape behind him. I stopped pouring mana into the shield as instructed, letting it fade, and the High Priest made his wand disappear as well.

"Stand down, Ferdinand." Sylvester jutted up his chin as he made the order. In response, the High Priest stepped back and knelt before Sylvester, arms crossed in front of his chest.

"...Um?" My jaw dropped at the sight of the High Priest kneeling. All blue priests were equal in status within the temple, and it was taught that there was no need for them to kneel to each other here, so the High Priest wouldn't be bowing before Sylvester like that if he was a blue priest.

...I thought Brother Sylvester was just a particularly high-status priest, but was he maybe a fake all along?

I knew from how close they had seemed over Spring Prayer that he and the High Priest went way back, but the High Priest had never done anything to express such a clear gap in status before. Were I to assume that I had seen a more personal side to their relationship during Spring Prayer, then this would be how they acted during official public business. In other words, not only was Sylvester not a blue priest, he was of a high enough status that someone with higher status than anyone in the Knight's Order would kneel before him.

...Am I about to be adopted by someone ridiculously important?

I felt a cold sweat run down my back. Sylvester was of a high enough status to suppress the High Bishop and make the High Priest kneel. To be fair, he had to be to save me and everyone else, but it was still coming out of left field for me. My heart pounded as I tried to process the situation.

"Aah, Sylvester! You've come at the perfect time. Do me a favor and order this insolent fool to undo these bindings," the High Bishop said while looking between him and the High Priest, still bound by the bands of light. They seemed to know each other. But all Sylvester did was glance in the kneeling High Priest's direction without ordering him to undo the bindings.

"I hurried back at the call of the Knight's Order, and this mess is what I find?"

What happened here?”

“...Wh-Who’re you?” Bindewald croaked out, his head shooting back and forth between Sylvester and the High Bishop. He wasn’t keeping up with the situation at all.

Karstedt took a step in front of Sylvester and, with his feet planted firmly and his head held high, glared down at Bindewald. “You sit before Aub Ehrenfest himself.”

“Wh... Wh-Wh-What?!” Bindewald pointed at Sylvester, shaking. “That can’t be! This is a lie!” he repeated over and over. Personally, I had absolutely no idea why he was shaking like a frog staring down the open mouth of a snake.

As I tilted my head in confusion, I heard a rustling as Dad got up so that he could kneel as well. I scooted over and whispered “Dad, do you know who that is?” in a quiet voice.

“There’s only one person in the duchy that has the same name as this city, and that’s the archduke,” he replied quietly, a grim look on his face.

...WHAT?! The adult-sized elementary schooler Sylvester is the archduke? I wanted to scream, but clamped a hand over my mouth and swallowed my surprise.

...This guy poked the cheek of a girl he’d just met, made her say “pooey,” snatched away her hair stick, performed acrobatic stunts in front of farmers, went hunting in the lower city’s forest without any guards... and he’s the archduke? A weirdo like him, the archduke? Um, what? Is this duchy going to be okay?

“You dare continue to play the fool?! Your rudeness will get you killed! That is not how one speaks to Aub Ehrenfest! Kneel, now!” barked Karstedt, interrupting my much more disrespectful thoughts.

“Y-Yes sir!” I jumped in surprise as Karstedt yelled at Bindewald, and I immediately knelt on the ground.

“...Myne. What in the world are you doing over there?” Karstedt called over in a voice tinged with both exasperation and confusion. I timidly lifted my head and saw that while everyone else was kneeling with their arms across their

chests, only I was groveling with my forehead pressed against the floor. Everyone was looking at me like I was a weirdo and it kinda hurt.

“W-Well, you said to kneel, so it kind of just... happened.” Apparently I had just made a fool of myself in the middle of something very important. I hurriedly fixed my posture and knelt properly, at which point Sylvester leisurely scanned the hallway. His expression was strict and deadly serious, unlike any I had seen him wear before. Had he been like this the first time I saw him, I wouldn’t have been surprised at all to learn that he was the archduke.

Sylvester’s gaze fell on the High Bishop, whereupon he narrowed his eyes. “Now then, could you explain what happened here, uncle?”

In a shocking twist, Sylvester and the High Bishop were relatives. That meant that, if Sylvester adopted me, I would end up related to the High Bishop too.

Nooo thank you! I don’t need a great-uncle like him!

“Aah, I knew you would listen, Sylvester!”

And so the High Bishop told his story, which was more than a little twisted in his favor: Count Bindewald had been summoned here because of me; it ended up in a mess that brought Sylvester back because of me; it was all my fault for not just letting myself get imprisoned; it was my fault he was suffering in the High Priest’s bands of light; and all the problems in the temple were caused by a commoner like me being given blue robes.

In the end, everything was apparently about eighty percent my fault, plus twenty percent the High Priest’s fault. We had supposedly used Sylvester’s absence to trick him and lead him into a trap. To be honest, it was all so paper thin that I honestly had to question whether the High Bishop was just plain stupid or not. Like, I had been doing pretty much all the math in the temple’s financial ledgers while helping the High Priest; I knew well that he wasn’t trying to trap the High Bishop while Sylvester was gone. That was just completely off base—the High Priest was much scarier than that.

“Count Bindewald, are you of the same perspective?” Sylvester asked, moving his eyes to Bindewald and frowning with annoyance after the High Bishop started repeating himself. The burned-up toad was pretty much on the same page as the High Bishop, blaming me, the commoner, for everything.

Isn't it kind of unreasonable to blame those burns on me? I mean, come on.

"Now then, Ferdinand. Please present your evidence and testimony."

"As you wish."

The High Priest began to dryly list off everything that had happened after Bindewald entered the city using a forged permit. He included a report on me being attacked in the lower city, seeking my father's perspective as a guard at the east gate where the problem had first occurred, which strengthened his testimony further. Judging by how much the High Priest knew, he must have been magically contacted in his room somehow, which was possibly why he had left his hidden room in the first place.

"As I am not from this duchy, I had no way of knowing that the rules had changed, or that my permit was forged. I was invited and came, nothing more. Is that a crime?" Bindewald insisted the incident in the lower city had nothing to do with him, and that he was just another victim here. "Aub Ehrenfest, I had no idea that this document was forged. I thought for certain that you had signed it yourself," he said with a forced smile while taking out a document from his coat pocket.

Karstedt retrieved it and handed the document to Sylvester, who looked over it before giving a slight grin. I could see him going "Hell yeah, evidence get!" on the inside, which made me realize something—there were some other documents I wanted him to get from Bindewald.

"Count Bindewald tricked Dirk into a submission contract by claiming it was an adoption form. Would that document count as forged as well?"

"This child is lying to you. I presented it as a submission contract from the very start. A noble such as myself would never adopt a commoner orphan," Bindewald replied on the spot, glaring at me and calling me a liar.

Delia glared back at him with a fierce look in her eyes, Dirk still in her arms. "The High Bishop and the count said it was an adoption form, and there were two layers of parchment at the top to hide the actual title."

"Silence!"

"...Show us the document."

With the second layer of parchment already removed, there was nothing suspicious about the submission contract at all. There was consequently nothing to hide, so Bindewald took it out and presented it to Karstedt without a moment of hesitation.

“So, Ferdinand?”

“I was shown an adoption contract.” The High Priest glared at Bindewald, as if frustrated that he would tell such an obvious lie. My testimony as a commoner and Delia’s testimony as an apprentice gray shrine maiden meant nothing due to our lower status, but the High Priest was a noble, which meant that his testimony had weight. The fact that Sylvester had asked for his opinion showed how much trust he had in him.

Bindewald paled, having disrespected the High Priest after thinking he was just another blue priest. “Surely you just misread. Plus, we are talking about an orphan with the Devouring here—in this case, there is not much difference between an adoption form and a submission contract. Am I wrong?”

He was wrong, but apparently he wanted to pretend he wasn’t. Bindewald’s eyes flitted across the room; he had sensed things weren’t in his favor and was looking for a way out which, in his mind, he found when he saw me. His eyes widened in realization and he pointed at me, changing the topic out of nowhere.

“More importantly, I ask you to punish that commoner!”

“Commoner?” Sylvester replied, an eyebrow raised. The fact he had replied at all must have made Bindewald think he had a chance as he began ranting about me, spit shooting out of his mouth.

“I have heard this Myne girl is a commoner who was only given blue robes due to your magnanimity, Aub. And yet, she arrogantly behaves as if she is at the top of the world. She fired her mana at me, a noble, and killed my personal guards who only fought to protect me. She is a dangerous and violent commoner. I can hardly imagine what vile corruption rots her mind.”

His speech was so ridiculous that I couldn’t help but blink in surprise. *What the heck is this toad saying? Does he have actual brain damage or something?*

“You’re the one who ordered your soldiers to kidnap me. Do you not even remember what you did just a moment ago?”

“Do not argue with a noble, commoner!” Bindewald barked, glaring at me furiously. But Sylvester just grinned.

“Count Bindewald, let me clear up a misunderstanding real fast. That girl you keep calling a commoner is my adopted daughter.”

“Sh-She’s... What?! A commoner, adopted by an archduke?!”

Sylvester, ignoring Bindewald’s stunned expression, gestured me over. “We’ve already finished the adoption contract. Myne, c’mere.” I walked over to him, and Sylvester pulled at the chain around my neck, exposing the necklace with the black stone. “And here’s proof of that.”

“This girl... is your adopted daughter...?”

“Yup. If she were a commoner, you’d be in the right here. The law would work in your favor. But Myne’s already my adopted daughter. Know what that means? Your crime isn’t just illegally entering the capital city of another duchy, it’s attacking a member of the archduke’s family. Her guards are seriously injured, and she’s saying that you attacked her with mana.” Sylvester gave a dismissive snort, then looked my way. “Tell me what the count did to you.”

“He didn’t just attack me with mana; I was ambushed in the lower city, and he tried to force a submission contract on me. That’s when he cut me with a knife,” I explained as I spread my palm, showing the wound that had finally stopped bleeding. I listed everything I could remember while watching the toad pale with horror. “The men that attacked us during Spring Prayer were also Devouring soldiers forced into submission contracts with him. He was whining about the pawns he lost when trying to attack me, both now and in the spring.”

My testimony as a commoner might not have meant anything, but being the daughter of the archduke changed that, whether I was adopted or not—not to mention that Sylvester had accompanied us during Spring Prayer. Count Bindewald was surely unaware of the fact, but his party had attacked the archduke directly.

“Fascinating. Sounds like he’s got a list of crimes to his name. Count

Bindewald, you're under arrest. Your crimes are illegally entering my city and attacking my daughter alongside her knight bodyguard," Sylvester said in a firm tone that left no room for argument. "As for the mysterious attack on the carriages during Spring Prayer, I was there with them. It will be taken as a declaration of war from your duchy's archduke. You are a criminal who has greatly disturbed inter-duchy politics; you will be interrogated, I will question Aub Ahrensbach on whether he does intend to declare war, and then your fate will be decided. Get him."

Karstedt made his wand appear and brought it down in a sharp slash, which sent bands of light just like the ones wrapped around the High Bishop flying out from its tip. Bindewald, his eyes rolled back in his head and foam bubbling at his mouth, was captured without any resistance.

Karstedt then strode to the door leading to the Noble's Gate, threw it open, and shot a beam of light up into the sky. The Noble's Gate opened, and the Knight's Order—having apparently been waiting behind it—marched into the temple to retrieve Bindewald and the unconscious Damuel. That was when Sylvester, who had been watching them out of the corner of his eye, shifted his gaze to the High Bishop.

"Sylvester, we do not even know what woman gave birth to Ferdinand. There is no need for you to pay any mind to the likes of him. And how were you ever fooled into adopting a despicable commoner like Myne? I cannot believe a child like her has corrupted the heart of our duchy's archduke. Please, cancel the adoption right away," the High Bishop said haughtily from the ground, still wrapped in bands of light. "This is my sincerest warning as your uncle and you would do well to listen."

I could tell from Karstedt's and Ferdinand's exasperated expressions that this wasn't the first time he had used that line.

"Ferdinand may have been born from a different mother, but he is still my little brother. He is skilled and his work is true. I will not have you scorn him."

"You cannot trust a half-blood relative! My older sister—"

"Your circumstances are your own. We are different."

...The High Priest is the archduke's half-brother, and the son of the last

archduke? Okay, that explains why the Knight's Order would kneel to him.

His past caught me by surprise. I could imagine that the High Bishop and Sylvester's mother were always trying to get in the way of their friendship. Maybe the High Priest had joined the temple due to something like that.

"You are my beloved nephew, Sylvester—the precious son of my older sister. I do not want you to suffer any misfortune. Please listen to my warning," the High Bishop pleaded like a desperate old man.

Sylvester looked down at him with cold eyes. "I am Aub Ehrenfest, and I will not repeat the same mistake forever. As archduke, I will abandon my familial sympathy and have you punished in accordance with the law."

"What?! Veronica will never accept this!"



Apparently, whenever the High Bishop broke any laws, Sylvester's mother would get involved and smooth over the situation for her little brother. I had been wondering why he was always so arrogant and aggressive, but now I understood—he really could do whatever he wanted when he had the archduke's mother compensating for his lack of status.

“Uncle, you went too far this time. Mother can no longer protect you. She too will be charged with forging documents and assisting in criminal acts.”

It looked like Sylvester would be charging his own mother in order to punish the High Bishop. I could guess that, in the past, his mother had only ever protected the High Bishop, never going as far as to commit crimes that could be traced back to her. But this time she had disobeyed the orders of the archduke and forged documents to allow an outsider into the city—a clear-cut crime, regardless of whether or not the archduke was her son. Sylvester no doubt intended to punish both his mother and his uncle in one fell swoop.

“Sylvester, you intend to turn your own mother into a criminal?! You will not escape from such a horrible act unharmed!”

“And that is your fault!” Sylvester barked after the High Bishop yelled in protest. “You have committed so many crimes that I can no longer even count them. Mother protected you out of love each time, and now it has come to this. You will be executed for your countless crimes, and Mother will be confined to her villa. You are not needed in my politics,” he concluded flatly.

The spark faded from the High Bishop's eyes and he looked at Sylvester with an ashen expression, like a fire that had burnt out. But archdukes did not go back on their word.

“Take the High Bishop and his attendants away.”

“Yes, sir!”

It seemed that just like how any crimes I committed would bring punishment to my family and attendants, any crimes the High Bishop committed would bring punishment to his attendants. The knights called by Karstedt first picked up the restrained High Bishop, then went to his room to get his attendants. The shrine maidens by the door were captured as well, with one of them being

Delia, who raised her head and looked desperately around for help.

Our eyes met for just a second. She lowered her gaze with a defeated smile, then held out Dirk. "Sister Myne, please take care of Dirk."

Her furrowed brow, lowered eyes, and trembling frown felt all too familiar; she had looked the same way when she had told me she wished I had saved her as well back when I started restructuring the orphanage.

A sharp stab of pain pierced my heart. I had made her a promise back then: I had told her that I'd be there for her the next time she was in trouble, that I would save her when she needed it.

I nodded to myself, then lifted my head. "Lord Sylvester, I have a request."

"Let's hear it."

"May I ask you not to execute Delia?"

"Why?" Sylvester asked, his deep-green eyes already gleaming with interest.

"Delia was simply tricked by Count Bindewald and the High Bishop. It is true that she made a lot of mistakes here, but she wasn't acting maliciously. Not to mention, she was only the High Bishop's attendant for a brief time, and given her very young age, I don't think she was involved in his illegal activities or flower offering at all."

"...Hm. True, but she was here and involved in the heart of this conflict, so she can't escape punishment. As the archduke's daughter, show me how you would judge her." His gaze made it clear that she would be executed as normal if he wasn't satisfied with my response, and I swallowed hard at the strictness hidden within the amusement in his eyes.

"Delia will return to the orphanage that she swore never to visit again if she could help it."

"That's all?"

"A-And, erm, she will not be allowed to become anyone's attendant. As the only escape from the orphanage is being taken as someone's attendant, this means she will remain there for the rest of her life, forced to stay in the orphanage she hated so much for however many years to come. I believe that is

more than enough punishment for her.”

Sylvester glanced at Delia, saw the blood draining from her face, and gave a small nod. “Seems like that will be a good punishment for her. Sure. Consider it done.”

“I thank you. Delia, you will now live in the orphanage. Your job will be to look after the orphans that are brought to us, starting with Dirk.”

“...Understood.” Delia squeezed Dirk in a hug, and her stiff expression softened just a bit.

The New Me

The knights bustled about, tying up the High Bishop and his attendants to take them away. I asked whether there was anything I could do to help, then saw Dirk still limp in Delia's arms.

"Um, I am worried about Dirk. If possible, I would like to go to the orphanage with Delia to inform Wilma of the circumstances."

"That's not important. Let someone else handle it," Sylvester replied, his arms crossed and feet firmly planted as he looked down at me. "The most important thing here is figuring out what's gonna happen with you, and we haven't even started on that. Ferdinand, lend us your room."

"As you wish. Please give me a moment to prepare." The High Priest smoothly turned around and returned to his room, preparing to welcome Sylvester, the archduke.

Delia hugged Dirk. "Thank you, Sister Myne. I will be fine on my own. Goodbye," she whispered before starting to walk to the orphanage. I watched her go.

"Are you Myne's father?"

"Yes, sir. My name is Gunther."

I turned around to see Dad kneeling before Sylvester, who was looking at him with an expression blank enough that I couldn't tell what he was thinking at all.

"Call your family. You're all we need to finish up the adoption papers, but I'll give you all an opportunity to say your goodbyes."

"...That is appreciated," Dad said as he stood up, his legs wobbly and fists tightly clenched. He too wore a blank expression, his low status preventing him from showing the storm of emotions raging within.

"Gunther, one moment. I will have someone show you to the gate," Fran said as he stood up as well. He winced in pain, then instructed a nearby gray priest

to guide Dad to the gate. He didn't forget to instruct someone to wait at the gate as well, since Dad would be coming back with the family soon.

"Alright, looks like Ferdinand's all done. Let's go, Myne." Sylvester started walking as soon as he saw one of the High Priest's attendants come out to summon us. Karstedt followed a step behind, having just finished giving instructions to the Knight's Order. When I started going as well, Fran took a wavy step forward to accompany me.

"Fran, you can go back to my chambers and rest if you're in too much pain..."

"No, I am your head attendant, Sister Myne. I cannot allow my mistress to face an important discussion like this alone," he said. There was nothing I could do about the firm resolve in his eyes. I permitted him to follow, and he walked on while doing his best to stop the pain from showing on his face.

Once in the High Priest's room, I was guided to the table, which had already been prepared for visitors. I sat down in the seat offered to me, but Sylvester and Karstedt went over to the High Priest's desk to discuss something.

"I am glad to see you well after all that, Sister Myne," Arno said gently as he pushed a serving cart carrying a tea set over to me. Fran moved to help as usual, but let out a grunt of pain after trying to extend his arm. "Perhaps you should return to your room, Fran? You seem to be in great pain, and she has other attendants who can be here," Arno murmured in a rebuking tone.

I wasn't supposed to get involved with conversations between attendants, but I was worried about Fran's wounds too and wanted to throw my full support behind Arno's suggestion.

"No, I must stay. I already asked Sister Myne to allow me to accompany her here."

"You really do lack flexibility, Fran."

That's right, Arno! Keep giving it to him! Make Fran agree to rest!

I internally cheered Arno on. I had let Fran join me since he was always so diligent and dedicated to his work, but would really rather he had gone back to his room to rest.

“I do not want to hear that from you, Arno. You could have told us that the High Priest was in his hidden room instead of sticking to the story of him being absent. Some flexibility there would have been much appreciated,” Fran complained, his frustration clear in his voice.

He was right, really—Arno was at times more inflexible than he probably should have been. Maybe that was just because he was the High Priest’s attendant and they all ended up like that. I gave a small smile.

“The tea is all we need. Leave.” The High Priest cleared the room, sending all of our attendants outside. The only ones left were me, the High Priest, Sylvester, and Karstedt. My family would be joining us eventually, but for now it was just us key members.

Sylvester’s archduke persona dropped as soon as the attendants were gone. He slumped over in exhaustion and hung his head. “Sheesh, I’m beat. I never want to put any of my family on trial again.”

“Things will get a lot easier for us after this. For now, just remember it’s not over yet. Keep your back straight,” Karstedt said, giving the slumped Sylvester a slap on the back.

Sylvester bent his lips into a frown and sent a glare in my direction. “Karstedt, think about it—what’s the point in acting big in front of Myne at this point? She understands me already.”

“If you’re going to be her adoptive father, you’ve got to at least stay sharp at the beginning,” Karstedt chastised. He honestly seemed like he would be a much more reliable adoptive father than Sylvester—so I thought for the thousandth time while watching their back-and-forth.

“If the High Bishop is your uncle, and the High Priest you’ve been so friendly with is your half-brother from another mother, is it safe to say you are related to Lord Karstedt by blood too?” I asked. Karstedt was close enough to Sylvester to hit him—the archduke—on the head alongside the High Priest. It was more likely than not that he was a blood relative too.

“Yeah, Karstedt’s my cousin—the son of my dad’s older brother.”

“Older brother? Wait, then how is succession determined here?” Apparently

it wasn't determined by age. Maybe the youngest son took over?

As I blinked in surprise, Sylvester looked at me with a baffled expression. "What else would it be determined by if not mana? The most important thing for someone ruling a duchy is having enough mana to keep it afloat, so successors are generally chosen from the first wife's kids, especially since she'll have a lot of political influence through her side of the family."

"I see... Even ruling duchies requires mana."

"...I forgot since you talk to us like it's nothing, but you really don't know anything about this place, huh?"

What was common sense for nobles wasn't even known by adults born and raised in the lower city, so it would be pretty unreasonable to expect me to know these things. I pouted, and Sylvester hardened his expression while still slumped over.

"Myne, let's be a little serious for a second."

"Okay."

"The adoption was more or less completed when you stamped your blood against the contract necklace I gave you, but we're going to need to pull some tricks to make sure this actually works."

Apparently, they were first going to pass me off as Karstedt's daughter and *then* have Sylvester adopt me. It was like money laundering, but for identity.

"Is there any significance to me becoming Karstedt's daughter?"

"Absolutely. Can't you tell there's a big difference between a commoner being adopted by the archduke and the daughter of an archnoble descended from a former archduke being adopted by the archduke?"

"That's true, but what's the point when so many from the Knight's Order already know I'm a commoner?" They would be able to draw a connection between the blue-robed commoner shrine maiden and the archduke's adoptive daughter the second they saw me. Surely they would question where all this business about me being Karstedt's daughter came from.

"That's just the Knight's Order. Karstedt and Ferdinand can take care of that."

The story's gonna be that you're Karstedt's beloved daughter."

"Um, 'the story'? I don't see any way this isn't going to be seen through right away. Am I the crazy one here?" There had been about twenty knights who had seen me during the trombe extermination; it was far too late to start saying that I was Karstedt's daughter if you asked me.

"Nah, it's surprisingly easy to mess with people's memories. Karstedt doted on his now-dead third wife, and you're her daughter," Sylvester said flatly with a shake of his head.

"The daughter of his third wife?"

"Right. Karstedt's third wife was of humble mednoble origin, but she had a wealth of mana. That led to his first two archnoble wives picking on her relentlessly."

Wow, this made-up story is starting to sound like a soap opera. How seriously should I be taking this...?

"She died not long after giving birth to you, and in order to save you from the same fate as your mother, Karstedt had you raised out of sight in the temple. He hid your origin for safety's sake, and my uncle misunderstood that to mean you're a commoner. He tricked countless people with his complaining, and due to his lies an innocent knight even ended up executed. My uncle's crimes know no bounds."

...The High Bishop's list of crimes keeps getting longer with things he didn't do! My jaw dropped at Sylvester's bare-faced audacity, and after a second of blinking in surprise, I looked at Karstedt and the High Priest. They both looked exasperated.

"But Lord Karstedt and I made it clear that it was our first meeting back during the trombe extermination."

"Of course the commander of the Knight's Order is gonna keep his private and public life separate—no commander would get all friendly with his secret daughter during a mission. We just have to say he was doing his job properly." Sylvester seemed intent on sticking to that story, but it seemed hard to believe that anyone would buy something like that. It just didn't add up, and since I

couldn't believe Sylvester, I turned to the High Priest for reassurance.

"Would a half-baked story like that hold water in noble society?"

"Myne, you may not remember this, but Christine was in the temple for fairly similar reasons."

The High Priest's cold words brought the memories flooding back. My main impression of Christine was that she was an artistic shrine maiden and the former mistress of Wilma and Rosina, but I did seem to remember something about her being a noble's daughter who was raised in the temple because her father's first wife disliked her. He had sent her money and tutors so that she could be welcomed back into noble society when it was safer for her.

"Well, a living example does make the story seem more believable. But would you really want a daughter with that kind of background, Lord Karstedt?"

"...It does not bother me. Many times before I have wished that I had a daughter with Rozemary before she passed." As it turned out, he actually did have a third wife who had apparently died after being bullied by his other wives.

Am I going to get bullied the second I become a noble?

"Ngh. Well, if you're fine with that, Lord Karstedt, I am as well. But wouldn't it be weird to introduce a child so long after their birth? Don't people celebrate children when they're born?" When Kamil was born, the first thing we did was throw a party and show him to everyone we could. I heard this was so as many people as possible would remember when he was born, since this world didn't have birth records, but maybe nobles were different.

Karstedt was the one who replied to my question. He put a hand on his chin and narrowed his eyes a bit, as if thinking things over from as many perspectives as possible. "We celebrate the births of children from first wives, but it is common not to bother informing others of births among second and third wives. In noble society, it is only at their baptism that children are introduced as members of the family. Few know just how many children anyone else has unless they are particularly close."

"Oh, I see." I nodded to myself, at which point the High Priest continued with

a thin smile.

“Reason being, children that lack the mana befitting their family are adopted by lesser families before their baptism or sent to the temple. The higher a noble is ranked, the less reason there is for them to announce a birth before they are sure the child has enough mana for them.”

...Holy cow! Noble society is actually terrifying! It seemed to be built entirely around having mana, and my upbringing in the lower city would be entirely irrelevant there. There was a lot of culture shock just from joining the temple, but I could already tell joining noble society would be far worse.

“So yeah,” Sylvester added, “if you want to raise your kid as a noble, the latest you can wait to reveal them is their baptism. Karstedt will use your baptism to announce that you were born with an extraordinary amount of mana, just like your mother, and that I’m adopting you. That way he could give his beloved daughter the status she deserves while protecting her from his wives... And that’s the story. Got all that?”

I nodded, thinking over everything he had just told me. “So noble society really is just like a (soap opera). Can I turn this story into a book?”

“You can include it in your autobiography if you ever write one.”

“...Ngh. I think I’ll pass, thank you.”

I’m just a very weak little girl who likes to read books. I’ll never write an autobiography. I rejected the idea immediately, earning me a grin from Sylvester and a comment that, since he had gone out of his way to think up the story, we might as well spread it across the world.

“Anyway, point being, we’ll hold your baptism ceremony this summer. It’ll happen in Karstedt’s mansion, and we’ll announce your adoption to me at the same time. Karstedt, when’s a good time for you?”

“How does right before the Starbind Ceremony sound? We’ll need time to prepare for the baptism—outfits, food, invitations, and the like,” Karstedt said.

The High Priest fell into thought, then shook his head. “I believe it would be better to plan the ceremony for a few days earlier rather than right before the Starbind Ceremony. Considering Myne’s poor health, we can never be sure

when she might end up bedridden. We need extra time to keep an eye on her.”

“I see, we’ll need a time buffer in case she gets sick. Hm. Preparing early will make things difficult,” Karstedt said with a troubled frown.

“Karstedt, invite as many people as you can to the baptism ceremony. Given that we’ll be announcing the adoption at the same time, the more people who are in attendance, the better.”

“Ah, that reminds me—you would do well to assign her an etiquette tutor before the baptism, Karstedt. She knows the fundamentals thanks to the instruction of her attendants, but she has never had a proper teacher.”

The three of them were ignoring me, steadily advancing their plans while I sat there, stunned.

“Um, but I already had my baptism ceremony a whole year ago... Won’t this mean we’ll be lying about my age?” Baptisms were held at age seven, and mine had happened a full year ago.

I don’t want to have another and go back to being seven years old. That feels like being held back a year in school.

I pursed my lips in a pout, and Sylvester glared at me with his deep-green eyes. “Don’t whine about a single year’s difference. This is to ensure you fit right into noble society, and considering how young you look, we could honestly even get away with pushing the baptism back an entire year, no problem.”

“An entire year? Now you’re just being mean. I am getting bigger, you know...!”

Since it was essential for me being accepted into noble society, going back to the age of seven was already set in stone. They ignored my frustration and continued the discussion.

“Anyway, about your life after the baptism... You’ll be participating in noble affairs as the daughter of the archduke—me—and when nothing’s going on you’ll be spending your time in the temple. Just like Ferdinand, really.”

“Bwuh?!” That sounded like such a busy lifestyle that I actually felt my face twitch in fear.

“With all of our mana problems, it would be putting too large of a burden on Ferdinand to take you completely out of the temple. Not to mention your workshop. The plan is for us to take on your book production as official duchy business, but it’ll be people in the lower city who actually make the books. It’ll be easier for me to make things happen if you keep your existing connections to the lower city. I’ve already talked this over with the Gilberta Company,” Sylvester said with the sly grin of someone who had a ton of irons in the fire.

When did that happen?! I thought, then remembered Benno being dragged away by Sylvester during his workshop tour and how thoroughly worn out he had looked after. Good luck, Benno. You have my support!

“Umm, so in short, after my second baptism I’ll be playing three roles at once? I’ll be the archduke’s daughter, a blue apprentice shrine maiden, and a forewoman? That’ll be exhausting,” I said while counting my roles on my fingers.

Sylvester shook his head. “Not quite. You won’t be an apprentice shrine maiden anymore. You’ll be the High Bishop.”

“What?” I asked, tilting my head at Sylvester. I had probably just misheard him. I had *definitely* just misheard him. *Ahaha, silly me, I really need to work on my hearing.*

As I attempted to avoid reality, Sylvester let out a sigh. “Nobody’s going to want to succeed a High Bishop who abused his power and ended up getting executed. Everything they do will be under scrutiny, meaning no room for any legally questionable behavior. It’s a job with nothing to make it worthwhile. On top of that, it comes with the archduke’s daughter and half-brother—who would take up the job knowing it’d wear on their sanity more by the day?”

“Um. Um. But in that case, shouldn’t the High Priest be the High Bishop? He’s much better suited for the job than I am,” I said, shooting a glance towards him, but Sylvester just gave an exasperated shrug.

“From an outside perspective it doesn’t really matter which one of you takes the job, but the actual work that’s expected of you both is entirely different. Ferdinand is at his best doing the nitty-gritty work and holding all of the priests together. You would never last as a High Priestess, Myne.”

It was true that the High Priest's duties covered a lot of ground. If you asked me whether I could do his job, the answer would be a firm no. But the High Bishop was the highest authority in the temple; those were shoes too big for me to fill.

"I can't be the High Bishop. I'm a kid who only had her baptism last year."

"My failure of an uncle managed it. You'll be fine. All you have to do is sit around and let things happen. Honestly, considering that all my uncle ever did was break the law, you'll be a better High Bishop than him just by doing nothing at all. Sure is nice to be following up a failure," Sylvester said, but I didn't think that was the problem.

As I floundered about nervously, the High Priest tapped his temple and began to speak. "It certainly will be a great deal easier to work without that oaf getting in my way; that alone is enough for me to welcome Myne as High Bishop. I myself will be handling the majority of the difficult work, but Myne is always more than willing to help when asked. I would much rather have her here than a *certain someone* who pushes all of his work onto others and then vanishes," he said, all the while glaring directly at that certain someone.

Sylvester snorted and said he could feel free to keep working me to the bone like he had been already. I ignored Sylvester's rude comment and decided to just thank the High Priest for his kind praise.

"Myne, you really think you should be treating me like that? I was gonna let you keep using the director's chambers as thanks for taking on the job, and I was gonna turn a blind eye to you sometimes meeting commoners there, but I'm not so sure now."

"Lord Sylvester, I love you." I curled my fingers into a heart in front of my chest, eyes shining.

Karstedt poked Sylvester in the side of the head. "He's making it seem like he's doing you a favor, but don't be fooled. He's just planning to turn the temple into his base so he can wander around the lower city."

"Bwuuuh?!"

"Karstedt, you make it sound so much worse than it actually is. I'm adopting

my cousin's beloved daughter. Why wouldn't I want to come visit her?" Sylvester asked with a serious expression, but on significantly closer inspection it was written all over his face that he just wanted to go hunting again. No doubt his plan here was just to make it easier for him to go and play around in the lower city.

"Sylvester, you're going to let Myne deal with commoners? I would think that is too dangerous, considering she'll be Karstedt's daughter," the High Priest commented warily.

"If we're going to grow book-making as a government business, we need connections with the Gilberta Company. Do you know how much work it would be to crush that store and build up a new one from scratch?" Sylvester replied casually.

"Um... You're going to crush the Gilberta Company?"

"Don't jump to conclusions. I'm not planning on doing anything to them. Their owner is quick on the uptake, and he knows how to keep a secret. Shockingly few people know who you really are, Myne, and most of those who do are Gilberta Company employees. Everyone else thinks you're either Benno's daughter or just some rich girl, so there won't be any problem with us saying you were a noble all along."

Although the books would be produced under the authority of the archduke, it would be my Gutenbergs who actually made them, with me at their center. As such, it was more convenient to keep a place that commoners were able to enter freely than to constantly have to summon them all to the Noble's Quarter.

"You can meet commoners in your chambers just like you have been," Sylvester said, and my face lit up. "But you will not be allowed to meet your family as family. You will become Karstedt's daughter and my adopted daughter. It's important that you leave your old family so that you might join ours; if you can't do that, I can't allow you to meet your family ever again."

My face darkened again. It was like a chill had been sent through my heart. I wasn't sure whether I should be happy that I was allowed to see them at all, or fearful that doing so would just make it hurt all the worse.

“There won’t be a problem with your soldier father accompanying you as a guard while you travel, or having your older sister get involved with making paper. Work relationships are fine. But I will have you swear through a magic contract that you will no longer call each other family,” Sylvester said. He looked at me with hard eyes, and I could feel my heart thumping painfully in my chest.

Ripped Apart

“If you are to be baptized as Karstedt’s child, you will need a new name,” the High Priest prompted, breaking the silence that had fallen over the room. I blinked in confusion, not following his logic.

“A new name?”

“Yeah, your current name doesn’t sound too great,” Sylvester agreed.

Apparently nobles needed to have long names, not short ones, which meant that all of the nobles I would soon be meeting against my will would have long names. Honestly, I had no faith that I’d be able to remember them all.

But I remembered all of those long god names, so maybe I’ll be fine? ...At least, I hope I will be.

“Ideally it’ll be something that can be shortened to ‘Myne’ as a nickname. That will help explain anyone from the Gilberta Company using her old name by accident. Myne, any preferences here?” Sylvester asked.

I tried to think of a new name that incorporated “Myne,” but sadly, nothing immediately sprung to mind.

“...All I can think of are terrible names like ‘Mynenigou,’ ‘Aratamyne,’ and ‘Akaimyne.’”

“Those all sound quite strange. I imagine they each have some particular meaning to you?” the High Priest asked with a confused frown. As he expected, I was using the Japanese from my Urano days, so nobody understood what I was trying to say.

“They mean ‘Myne Two,’ ‘New Myne,’ and ‘Red Myne,’ respectively.”

“Why is ‘Red Myne’ one of your suggestions? Your color would be blue based on your birth, midnight blue based on your hair, or gold based on your eyes. Where are you getting red from?”

“I don’t really understand this myself, but red versions of people tend to be,

like, stronger, or faster.”

Sylvester gave me a weird look, but I was basing that off of something my childhood friend from my Urano days had told me, so I didn’t really have a strong grasp on the concept myself. My mom was completely sold on the “red underwear is lucky” boom of her day, so that was probably one of the reasons I subconsciously associated the color with strength.

Incidentally, red underwear was supposedly good to wear when the stakes were high. My mom had given me a pair for my college admission exam, but I was too embarrassed by her motherly love to actually wear them. I luckily passed the exam anyway, and while that made my mom’s faith in red underwear grow even deeper, I had actually been wearing light-blue underwear at the time.

I’m sorry I was such a bad daughter.

As my thoughts wandered, Sylvester’s eyes shot open in shock at my statement. “Hold on a second! I’m the one who’s confused here. Red is a strong color?! If we’re talking about strength, what else is there but blue, the divine color of Leidenschaft?!”

Karstedt rested a hand on his forehead, and his face seemed to cloud over a little. “Red is the divine color of Geduldh, the Goddess of Earth. It represents warmth and compassion, which is feminine, but not exactly what you seem to have been going for.”

...Yeaah, okay. I guess that’s what happens when you have two different cultures that have developed independently.

My goal had been to envision a new me, stronger and healthier than ever before, but that didn’t get through to anybody.

The High Priest glared at me, tapping a finger against his temple. “You should know that strength and speed are ill-fitting for a woman’s name. Your lack of common sense astounds once again. Need I remind you that this is the name you will be using for the rest of your life? Think harder, fool.”

“...I’m sorry. But honestly, I don’t really know what kind of names nobles usually have, or in what manner they’re given, so I’m kind of at a loss here.”

When coming up with names in Japan, we would sometimes borrow parts of a parent's name, have the local temple decide, or base the name on some personal family tradition. I had no idea how names were decided here, and when I asked for details, Sylvester, Karstedt, and the High Priest all seemed thrown off.

"Some people take names from their ancestors or great people of history, but there aren't really any rules beyond that," Sylvester explained. I nodded, intrigued, as Karstedt rubbed his chin in thought, then raised his head to look at me.

"If we were to borrow from the name of one of your parents... what if we took inspiration from the 'Roze' in 'Rozemary' and named you 'Rozemyne'?"

"Wow! Now that sounds like a noble girl's name. I like it a lot. It's much cuter and more feminine than anything I could have ever come up with."

"It seems you will need to work on developing a better sense of aesthetics, Myne," the High Priest said with a quiet laugh before standing up. It seemed he would be writing up both the magic contract to change my name and the previously discussed contract before my parents arrived.

Not long after he finished, we heard the tingling of a small bell outside.

"You may enter," the High Priest permitted, and an attendant who had been waiting outside opened the door. Fran guided the visitors inside as Arno announced their arrival with long noble phrases. Tuuli was holding hands with Dad, and Mom was carrying Kamil in a sling.

"Myne!" Tuuli let go of Dad's hand and raced toward me, positively beaming as she jumped into my arms.

"Tuuli." I hugged her back, and after a tight squeeze, she let go of me and started to make sure I wasn't hurt anywhere.

"Dad was super hurt and came to get us with a scary look on his face. He even said Mom had to bring Kamil to the temple, so I was really scared something had happened to you, Myne. I'm so glad you're safe."

Tuuli, in all her innocence, was just glad to see that I was safe, but Mom understood the situation as soon as she saw the High Priest and the other

nobles in the room. She shut her eyes in anguish as she knelt down, Kamil in her arms.

“Tuuli, there are nobles here. You need to kneel,” Dad said, plopping a firm hand on Tuuli’s shoulder as he did so himself. Tuuli blinked in surprise and looked around the room, and the moment she saw the three well-dressed men sitting calmly at the table, she hurriedly knelt down as well.

“Arno, Fran—leave.” The High Priest cleared the room, sending out the gray priests who had guided my family inside. The door shut tight, and Sylvester—the highest authority in the room—casually waved his hand.

“Have a seat. I permit you to speak.”

“It is an honor, sir.” Dad gave his soldier’s salute before sitting at the table. Mom did the same, trudging her way to an empty seat. Tuuli looked around anxiously, sensing the sparks in the air, then sat next to me.

Sylvester crossed his legs and exhaled before beginning to speak. “The situation has demanded that I adopt Myne and have her as my daughter.”

“...Understood.”

“Make it so that the commoner Myne has died here.”

Tuuli shot her head up and looked at me, her face pale. “Is this my fault?! You were attacked because I came to get you, right?!”

“No, Tuuli. The culprit was inside the temple all along, so I would have been attacked even if you hadn’t come to get me.” I desperately explained the situation as best I could so that Tuuli wouldn’t blame herself. I told her how it had gotten so dangerous that I had needed to attack a noble, which was a crime that would put my family and attendants in danger too. “If this is anyone’s fault, it’s mine for getting you all wrapped up in this. ...It was scary, wasn’t it, Tuuli?”

“It was scary. It was, but... adoption...?” Tuuli looked at the floor, tears dripping from her eyes. I reached out and stroked her hair.

Sylvester looked at Tuuli, a painful grimace flashing across his face for only the briefest of moments before he quietly spoke with the hard expression of an archduke. “Myne needs to be the daughter of an archnoble so that I may adopt

her. You, her family, are complicating that. I considered executing you all to tie up any loose ends, but since that would no doubt send Myne into a frenzy, I decided to spare your lives. However, that does not change that you cannot meet as family ever again.”

Sylvester’s firm declaration made everyone in my family gasp in shock. They looked at him with wide eyes, their lips trembling.

“The Myne Workshop will continue to exist and produce paper, books, and other products. She will also remain in possession of her chambers in the temple, so if you sign this contract you will be able to meet her on business. That is all I can permit.” Sylvester held out the magic paper being used for our magic contract—it was the one the High Priest had just finished making. “Myne, read this for them. They’ll trust you more than they would any of us.”

Most commoners couldn’t read, which led to more than a few cases of people getting tricked into signing unfavorable contracts. I had heard there were even merchants who had suffered great losses after not understanding deceptive euphemisms that nobles had slid into their contracts. That was why it was important for the illiterate to have someone who they could trust available to read for them.

I stood up and headed to the part of the table where the pen and ink had been lined up. Sylvester, Karstedt, and the High Priest were to my left, while my family was sitting to my right. I picked up the contract while looking at them all, then frowned hard; it hurt so, so bad that I had to read out loud a contract made to separate me from my family.

“Myne will be announced to be dead. Henceforth, neither party may acknowledge the other as family, should they ever meet. Myne must be treated as one would treat a noble. Thus are the terms of this contract.” I set the paper onto the table and saw Tuuli, who was sitting the furthest away from me, start to cry again.

“If I sign this, does that mean you won’t be my little sister anymore, Myne?”

“We won’t be sisters even if you don’t sign it.” The contract was mainly there to allow us to continue seeing each other; my adoption was going to happen either way.

“I don’t want that!”

“Me neither, but I don’t want to put you in any more danger. You survived this time, but maybe you won’t next time. They might even go after Mom and Kamil next. All because of me...”

A haunted look crossed Tuuli’s already pale face. She must have remembered the fear she had felt when being kidnapped. Not much time had passed since a knife had been held to her throat; it only made sense that she would be afraid.

“I don’t want to keep putting my family in danger. Please understand, Tuuli. This is for your sake.”

“But...” Tuuli bit her lip and groaned, unable to agree with me. I wanted to cry too. My vision blurred, and a tear rolled down my cheek.

“Tuuli, please. Write your name on it. If you don’t, we’ll never see each other again. Even if we stop being family, even if I can’t call you my big sister, I at least want to keep seeing you. I don’t want this to be goodbye forever.”

“Wha?” Tuuli looked at me wide-eyed, then abruptly stood up and raced toward me, tears trailing behind her as she ran. I immediately clung to her.

“I’ll do my best to make books and toys for you and Kamil, okay? Come and visit me in the temple and my chambers. Just let me see you. I want to know how you’re doing.”

“Myne. Don’t cry.” Tuuli tightened her arms around me and spoke in a halting voice, pausing as she tried to choke back her tears. “I’ll come... visit you in the temple. I’ll work hard... and learn to read... so I can... read your books. Okay?”

“Uh huh. I want you to come visit, and then take the toys and books back home with you. Kamil can’t come to the temple until his baptism, so I’ll need you to give him my gifts for me.” I looked up at Tuuli, and her warmth forced my troubled frown into a smile.

Tuuli wiped the snot from her nose while she responded. “Definitely. I’ll definitely give him your gifts.”

“Also, you’re joining Corinna’s workshop, right? If you work hard and become a first-rate seamstress, I’ll order my clothes from you. I want you to make my

clothes one day, Tuuli.”

My request restored the light in Tuuli’s puffy red eyes, and she gave me a firm nod. “I promise. I’ll make your clothes, no matter what.”

“I love you, Tuuli. I’m so proud to have an older sister like you.”

We hugged tightly once more, then Tuuli signed the magic contract, sobbing all the while. It felt a little ironic that the letters she had worked so hard to learn over the winter would prove useful here.

She took out her knife and cut her finger to make the bloody fingerprint. Her part done, she returned to her seat, still choking back sobs.

“Myne.” Mom stood up from her chair, handing Kamil in his sling to Dad. She knelt beside me as I stood next to the contract, and while on her knees embraced me in a warm hug. Perhaps due to the smell of milk, I was enveloped by a sweet, nostalgic scent as I wrapped my arms around her too.

“Mom...” I couldn’t think of what to say as I kept hugging her tight. As I stood there in silence, Mom whispered to me in a troubled tone.

“It’s too soon for you to be leaving your parents.”

“I’m sorry, Mom.” She was holding me so closely that I could hear her heartbeat as she spoke. She stroked my hair like she usually would at night when we went to bed, and started giving me her usual list of warnings.

“Take care of yourself, Myne. You always get sick so easily. Ask the people around you for help when you need it. Listen to what they tell you so you don’t keep being a thorn in their side. And don’t charge off and do things on your own. Help where you can, but don’t rely on others too much. And...”

Normally I would have stopped paying attention by now, but the realization that I’d never hear her lecture me like this again made my heart sink. I nodded, still clinging to her, and listened to every word, but she was saying so much that eventually she just started repeating herself. It almost made me laugh.

“And finally, one last thing.”

“There’s still something else?” I looked up and actually did let out a chuckle. Mom’s own smile broke down, and I could feel her tears drip down onto my

face.

“Don’t push yourself too hard. Stay safe and happy. I love you, Myne. My precious Myne.”

“I love you too, Mom.”

Mom let me hold onto her for a little longer, then slowly let go and stood up.

“Mom, do you need me to... Do you need me to write your name?” Dad could sign his name thanks to work, and I had taught Tuuli how to write while she was studying in the temple. I didn’t think Mom knew how to write, but she slowly shook her head at my offer.

“I studied with Tuuli over the winter; I wanted to read the letters you wrote too. It’s not much, but I can write everyone’s names now.” Mom gave an embarrassed smile and picked up the pen before writing her name and Kamil’s with a shaky hand. Once that was done, like Tuuli, she also stamped the contract with her blood.

Dad walked over to us, holding Kamil in his sling; he was probably about to hand Kamil over to Mom, as she stayed standing instead of going back to her seat.

“Um, Dad. Can I hold Kamil?”

“Yeah.” Dad undid the sling, needing Mom’s help to do so since he could barely move his arm, then held Kamil out to me.

I held him properly, having finally learned how to, and his eyes opened the moment I peered at his face. Kamil’s sweet baby scent caught my nose as I rubbed my cheek against his; I inhaled deeply, then gave his cute forehead a kiss. “I don’t think you’ll remember me, but I’ll make lots of picture books for you. Be sure to read them all for me, okay?”

I handed Kamil back to Mom before he could start crying. After a moment of hesitation, she made a small cut on his finger, then stamped it against his name as he started crying in pain.

Mom left while consoling Kamil, leaving me with Dad. He hugged me using just his right arm since the burns on his left stopped him from being able to

move it much.

“Dad, is your arm okay? It hurts, doesn’t it? I’m sorry... You got hurt because of me.”

“No. I’m your father, but I wasn’t strong enough... I couldn’t protect you. I’m sorry, Myne,” Dad forced out in a low voice, his face twisted with regret and tears trickling down his cheeks. As I felt his arm tighten around me, I shook my head over and over.

“No, Dad, you’ve protected me my whole life. If I ever get married, I hope it’ll be to someone strong who can protect me just like you have.”

Hearing that, Dad furrowed his brow and shook his head, now wearing a tearful grin. “Myne, if whoever you marry can’t protect you, I’ll come beat him up myself.”

“Uh huh. I know you’ll always be there for me, Dad.” I hugged him tighter, and Dad buried his face in my shoulder.

“Yeah... I’ve always wanted to hear a daughter of mine say that, but now that I have and now that you’re going to leave, it hurts more than anything.”

Dad had protected me and raised me my whole life, and I couldn’t stop crying. “My name’s going to change, and I can’t call you ‘Dad’ anymore, but... I’ll always be your daughter. I’ll protect this city, and you, and everyone. I will.”

“Myne.” Dad squeezed me tighter, and I couldn’t stop the explosion of emotions inside of me. The ring the High Priest had lent me started shining as my mana poured into it.



“What?!”

“Myne!”

Dad stepped back in surprise, looking between my shining ring and the three nobles who had all stood up with their shining wands in hand.

“Myne, contain yourself!”

“No. My mana is overflowing because of my love for my family, so I have to use it for their sake,” I murmured. The ring shone brighter, and my lips started chanting a prayer almost on their own.

“O mighty King and Queen of the endless skies, ye mighty God of Darkness and Goddess of Light; O mighty Eternal Five who rule the mortal realm, ye mighty Goddess of Water Flutrane, God of Fire Leidenschaft, Goddess of Wind Schutzaria, Goddess of Earth Geduldh, God of Life Ewigeliebe; I ask that ye hear my prayers and grant thy blessings.”

I gradually spread my arms, and a faint, fluttering yellow light gleamed from inside the ring as I spoke the name of each god. I looked at the light of my mana and continued my prayer, all so that my family could be blessed as much as possible once I was gone.

“I offer thee my heart, my prayers, my gratitude, and ask for thy holy protection. Grant those I love the power to strive toward their goals, the power to deflect malice, the power to heal their pain, and the power to endure trials and tribulations.”

A gentle yellow light filled the room, then started to trickle down from above like shining snowflakes. The light didn’t just land on my family; I could see some of it flying out of the room, as if going toward the other people who were precious to me.

“The burns are gone...” Dad said, running a hand along his now-unscathed left arm.

“That’s the healing power of Flutrane.”

“Myne, I’m proud to have a daughter like you. Use the powers you’ve been gifted right, and protect this city.”

“I won’t use them to do anything you’d get mad about. I promise.”

After bumping his fist against mine, Dad turned to the contract paper and signed it, his hand shaking as he did so. He then cut his finger using a knife and stamped it against the contract, before lowering his head and gritting his teeth.

I took the pen in hand and looked at my family one by one. Tuuli was looking at me with bright red eyes; Kamil was no longer crying, perhaps due to my blessing having healed his cut; Mom was crying quietly, hugging Kamil to her chest while she watched me; and finally, Dad was standing next to me, his head lowered and a hand covering his eyes.

“Dad, Mom, Tuuli, Kamil. I love you all.”

In front of me were two contracts: one to stop me from referring to my family as family, and one to change my name from “Myne” to “Rozemyne.” I clenched my teeth and signed both in quick succession, then held out my palm to Dad. Crying, but resolved, he made a slight cut on my finger for me, and I stamped the blood that puckered up onto both contracts. In an instant, they both burst into golden flames and disappeared, along with everybody’s signatures.

“The contracts are sealed. Before us stands Rozemyne, the daughter of an archnoble,” Sylvester said as my family jolted in surprise at the sudden flames. They looked down at the floor, then knelt.

“We will take our leave, then.”

“Please take care of yourself, milady.”

“...Farewell.”

Now that I was the daughter of an archnoble, we could no longer act as equals. They wouldn’t understand what a bow meant—the culture here hadn’t developed in the same way—but I didn’t care; I bent my hips in a ninety-degree angle and hung my head low, hoping to convey my respect and gratitude as much as possible.

“Thank you for coming today. I pray from the bottom of my heart that we meet again one day.”

With that, those who I had once known as my family left, and I, now

Rozemyne, could not follow them. I was alone.

Epilogue

Lutz was in the Gilberta Company. He had just escaped there with the others after Myne and Tuuli were attacked by strange men on the way home, with Gunther, Damuel, and Otto managing to get them back following a tough fight.

“Otto, Lutz, what happened?! Tell me everything you can without breaking any secrets!” Benno yelled, rushing up the stairs. Someone must have told him that they had fled here.

Otto debated over what to say for a second, then narrowed his eyes at Benno in a glare. “Benno, keep your voice down. You’ll wake Renate.”

“Yeah, yeah. Whatever. Lutz, ignore Otto and tell me what you can.”

Otto and Benno’s usual back-and-forth helped Lutz relax just a little. He started to explain the situation, starting with Tuuli having come to walk home together. They then met Otto searching for another duchy’s noble on the way home, and while talking to him, they were attacked. The attackers were after Myne, but given how they argued about which girl to get, they couldn’t have known her very well.

Damuel stopped the attackers in their tracks, and then they ran to the Gilberta Company. From there, Myne and Gunther went to the temple to tell the High Priest what had happened, while Damuel called the Knight’s Order over.

“Oh yeah, Myne apparently called for help too,” Otto murmured.

All eyes fell on him. Lutz, having been racing to keep up with Gunther, hadn’t noticed Myne calling for help. There was so much that Lutz didn’t know, especially given that Gunther had stopped him from going to the temple, and that just made him even more frustrated with himself.

“She stamped some blood from her knee onto a charm hanging from her neck. Apparently someone would come help her if she was in trouble.”

Lutz had no idea what all that was about, but Benno seemed to have an idea.

“This is much too soon! Damn it all!” he spat, then spun around to return to the store.

“Master Benno, what happ—”

“It’s absolutely top secret!” Benno yelled as he raced down the steps, cursing at who knows what.

Lutz bit his lip. Something was happening right now, and he had no idea what it was. Myne was in so much danger, but he couldn’t do anything for her. There was a wall he couldn’t climb over no matter how hard he tried. A wall keeping him from her. A wall no amount of guts or determination could overcome.

“Look, Benno’s yelling made Renate cry. What a scary uncle he is. There, there.” Otto picked up Renate and started gently rocking her, which was enough to bring Corinna back to her senses—her widened eyes had been fixed on Benno’s intense expression.

Tuuli also seemed to relax slightly, the stiff look on her face loosening as everyone moved toward Renate. She had been shaking and hadn’t said a word since coming here, but now she murmured something about how she was supposed to have brought the toy she made with Myne. That inspired Otto to start bragging about Renate, which Tuuli fought back against by bragging about Kamil.

...I’m tired of listening to you both, seriously.

Lutz, unwilling to join the conversation about babies, walked up to a window and looked down at the street. He thought he might be able to see soldiers or knights moving around, but all he saw was the usual flow of people, as if the ambush had never happened at all.

Myne’s okay... right...?

“Tuuli, we’re going to the temple. C’mere.” After some time, Gunther came to get Tuuli. His left arm was covered in what looked like severe burns.

Her face paled when she saw the black and red discoloration streaking down his forearm. “Dad, what happened to your arm?! Where’s Myne?!”

“She’s in the temple. Come on.” The cheerful smile Gunther would always have on his face when talking to his daughters was nowhere to be seen; a frown creased his forehead, and his voice came out uncharacteristically flat.

Effa was behind him, Kamil in her arms. Given that she had only just recently given birth, she wasn’t supposed to be moving around much yet; if she was being called to the temple with everyone else, something had definitely happened to Myne. Sensing that, Lutz looked up at Gunther.

“Mr. Gunther! I can—”

“I’ll explain later. Wait here.”

No matter how close he and Myne were, they weren’t family—that was why Lutz hadn’t been called as well. All he could do was wait at the Gilberta Company, unable to go to the temple by himself.

“...I’ll either be on the first floor, or at Benno’s place on the second floor.”

“The first or second floor? Alright.”

Up until now he had been at Corinna’s place, since Tuuli was scared and he wanted to stay by her side. On his own, however, there was no need for him to be there. As a leherl, he belonged at Benno’s place on the second floor, one floor down.

...I’m just gonna be anxious all day if I sit around doing nothing. Might make more sense for me to get some work done.

Lutz followed Gunther and the others down the stairs to the store on the first floor. As they reached the exit, Gunther suddenly turned around and glared at Otto, who was still holding Renate.

“Otto, you hurry on back to the gate. Tell the commander a knight ordered me to go to the temple.”

“Yes, sir!”

Lutz saw Myne’s family off, then went back to the store. Benno and Mark were discussing printing workshops with deadly serious expressions on their faces. There must have been some kind of secret to Myne’s charm—one that would have an enormous impact on these workshops they had planned.

...If I don't hurry up and get to work, I'm gonna be left behind.

Benno wasn't even thinking about Lutz when he had heard about Myne's charm and rushed down the stairs; he hadn't even called him to his discussion with Mark. He had no choice but to give up on going to the temple, but he wasn't about to be excluded from the printing workshops too.

I'm not gonna let them leave me behind!

Lutz pumped himself up and started working through the Myne Workshop's profit ledgers. Gil was working hard to learn math, but wasn't quite good enough to manage by himself. He still needed Lutz to look over his work.

"Why not just leave all that to the workshop? If they mess up and lose money, that's on them," Leon said with a grimace as he peeked over Lutz's shoulder. He was a leherl being trained as a waiter in the temple who had a considerable amount of experience dealing with workshops and stores, and firmly believed that Lutz was getting too involved in the Myne Workshop. After all, Lutz was looking over their ledgers and doing all sorts of additional work for them—from an outsider perspective, it did seem to be a clear case of favoritism. But Lutz didn't see it that way at all.

"The orphanage branch of the Myne Workshop is just a trial run for the new printing workshops that're gonna be made. I've gotta do a good job here."

"New workshops? You're doing that kind of work?" Leon raised his voice in surprise, and Lutz gave a big nod.

"Unless I get good enough to help Master Benno establish new workshops, he won't bother to take me to different cities. Messing up with the Myne Workshop a little is no big deal, so he told me to use it as practice. This isn't actually favoritism at all."

"Hm. So they're just a stepping stone, huh...?"

Leon wasn't wrong: unlike the children of merchants, Lutz didn't have a family store he could practice with. Myne's workshop was the only place he could use to grow while not having to worry about making mistakes.

It was when he had finished the paperwork and was waiting for Benno to look it over that balls of light suddenly burst in through the window. They passed

right through the glass, then started to spin around the room.

“Wh-What the?!”

Benno, Mark, and Lutz all stared wide-eyed as the spinning balls turned to a glimmering dust that rained down on them. Oddly, the light seemed to be avoiding Leon entirely.

As Lutz stood in place, looking up at the ceiling in a daze, the light gradually faded. Eventually it disappeared completely, as if nothing had happened at all, and a stunned silence fell over the room.

“...What the heck was that?” Benno asked.

“I do not know,” Mark replied.

Leon looked over in bewilderment. “That stuff was definitely avoiding me, right?”

Lutz looked down at his palm where some of the light had landed. None of it remained, instead having seemingly melted into his body. Everyone blinked in confusion, wondering what had happened and why the dust had avoided Leon, until eventually Gunther and the others returned to the store.

“Sorry for the wait, Lutz.”

They all wore dark expressions, and their eyes were puffy from crying. Lutz had assumed they had gone to fetch Myne from the temple, but she was nowhere to be seen. Nervous butterflies fluttered in his stomach. He kept his mouth shut, worried that if he asked where Myne was, he would never be able to go back to how things once were.

Lutz looked around the room, trying to find something else to talk about, when suddenly his eyes fell on Gunther’s arm. The skin was smooth, the discolored burns from before having vanished entirely.

“Mr. Gunther, your burns...”

“It was Myne’s last blessing. Her light dust healed the burns,” Gunther grunted through clenched teeth. Lutz looked at Tuuli and Effa, shocked by Gunther’s choice of words.

Last blessing?

Lutz swallowed hard, his body trembling. But before he could ask Gunther what he meant, Mark clapped his hands together.

“Then I suppose the light dust we just saw was Myne’s blessing as well?”

“...The light came here too?” Gunther asked, his eyes widening slightly in surprise. Lutz nodded hard, explaining how balls of light had burst into the room then turned into a dust that rained down on everyone except Leon.

“Seems like the light went to everyone Myne cares about. Pretty strong blessing, too. It’d have to be to cure those burns,” Gunther said with a sad smile. The resignation in his eyes told Lutz everything: it had all ended elsewhere in a place he could never go.

“...What happened to Myne? Why isn’t she here?”

“Myne’s gone now. The nobles took her. She’s gone,” Tuuli said, tears streaming down her face and dripping onto the floor. Benno furrowed his brow hard and narrowed his eyes.

“Gunther, tell me one thing: is the Myne Workshop going to keep running?”

“Master Benno! Myne’s gone; now’s not the time for that!”

“Shut up! This is important. If she’s dead, I’ll have to buy the workshop and keep it going. If the nobles took her, I’ll have to do something else. And the sooner I act, the better.”

Lutz couldn’t understand what Benno was saying, but it seemed Gunther did. “Benno... Do you know?”

“I’m not sure about the details, but Otto said she stamped that charm with her blood. I know what’ll happen if Myne didn’t die—Aub Ehrenfest will take her. So... what’s the name of the new forewoman?”

Gunther, glaring at Benno with eyes so cold they froze Lutz’s blood, opened his mouth. “Rozemyne. The daughter of an archnoble. She runs the workshop now. Myne is dead. That’s the story.”

“‘That’s the story’...?” Lutz was at a loss for words, and Gunther ruffled his hair entirely like he would do to Myne.

“Myne became the daughter of an archnoble to protect us. To protect her

family. To protect you. For the archduke to be able to adopt her, she needs to be known as the daughter of an archnoble, and that'll save her life and ours. But in return, we were forbidden through a magic contract to ever treat her like family again. You all are in too deep with Myne. Be careful if you don't want to get executed."

"I appreciate the warning," Benno said sincerely before letting out a sigh and slumping his shoulders. "Still, I thought we had at least two years to prepare for this. Life sure comes at you fast."

"What?! Master Benno! Myne's gone! An archnoble took her and she can't see her family as family anymore! What're you saying?!" Lutz yelled, shocked by Benno's attitude. But all he got was a cold look from him.

"Listen up, Lutz. That weirdo didn't die. She's gonna keep on living as Rozemyne. You think that weirdo's gonna change as a person just 'cause she went from being a commoner to an archnoble's daughter? No! The only thing that's changed is how much more terrifying her rampages are gonna be now that she has actual authority!" Benno roared.

Myne's stomping around was scary enough already, but now that she had the authority of an archnoble, there would be nobody who could stop her.

"Not to mention, if she's only changed her name, then Rozemyne is still going to be a partner in the Italian restaurant. The Gilberta Company just finally managed to get some business from mednobles after years of serving laynobles, and now we're suddenly co-owning a business with an archnoble? If you've got the time to be all weepy, get to work instead! Whether her name's 'Myne' or 'Rozemyne,' what's that weirdo gonna want?!"

A bookworm whose obsession had survived an actual death and reincarnation wouldn't change her ways just from becoming an archnoble named "Rozemyne." There was only one thing she would want more than anything else:

"Books!"

"That's right. She's higher in status now and we're gonna have to make some changes, but we're still a business doing trade, and with the archduke's approval we're gonna be doing business with Rozemyne whether we like it or

not,” Benno said, and all of Myne’s family shot their heads in his direction. “You all might not be able to meet or talk to an archnoble, but we can talk to Rozemyne as business partners. We’ve got paperwork to exchange, and it’ll be more than easy to slip some letters in amid all the papers. I predicted this would happen and already had Lutz and Myne sign a magic contract together; all else fails, we’ll still be able to stay in written contact with her.”

They couldn’t face Myne and call her their family, but nothing stopped them from writing letters to her. Benno gave a pained grin as he explained that even magic contracts had loopholes.

“Is that true, Lutz? If I write Myne a letter, will you give it to her for me?” Tuuli asked, pulling Lutz back to his senses. There were still things he could do for Myne. As long as she was alive, it wasn’t too late—he could make books and act as the bridge between her and her family, and with that in mind, he gave a big nod.

“You can count on me.”

They left the store together and started on their way home. Myne was, for all intents and purposes, dead to the world; they would have to hold a funeral for her as soon as they got back.

“Lutz, Myne was killed by the noble that broke into town. Tell that to your family. We’ve got our own preparations to take care of,” Gunther said, his brow tightly furrowed as he looked up at the sky. In a way, that explanation wasn’t dishonest. After all, it was because of the noble who had broken into town that Myne had become a noble herself.

“Alright.”

After getting home, Lutz told his parents about Myne’s funeral, and they all hurried to finish their dinner. His parents were the first to rush outside, each wearing black cloth around one arm. Lutz and his brother Ralph followed suit, each wrapping black cloth around one arm to signify that they were involved with the funeral.

“...Hey, Lutz. Why did Myne die? She was doing better lately, wasn’t she?”

“Mr. Gunther said a noble killed her. I don’t know anything else since I wasn’t there.”

Neighbors wearing black cloth wrapped around their arms gathered by the well in the plaza. Normally the corpse would be rested on a board to be carried to the graveyard, but without a corpse they couldn’t do that for Myne. Instead, there was just a tiny box. Inside were Myne’s clothes and the hair stick she usually wore. Nothing else.

“What’s going on here? Where’s the body?” one of the neighbors asked. Everyone was surprised by the unusual funeral.

Gunther, who was leading the funeral, grimaced and looked at the ground. There was clear pain in his eyes. “Myne was attacked by a noble from another duchy. They killed her and stole her body.”

“...That’s, uh... That’s real tragic. I’m sorry for your loss.”

Anything that was stolen by nobles would never come back. Everyone in the neighborhood knew how deep Gunther’s love was for his kids, and how much he doted on Myne despite her sickly nature. They knew without even asking how much it hurt him to not even get her body back, and since nobles were involved, nobody asked him about anything else.

“It’s a real shame, too. She was finally getting healthy again.”

The neighbors looked at the wooden box and thought back to how Myne had been during her baptism and Kamil’s birth, and began sharing stories and the like.

It was said that the door to the land of the dead opened only at dawn, when the God of Darkness and the Goddess of Light met, and that the husband and wife gods would guide the recently deceased there when the morning sun had risen. Those who knew the deceased would share memories and talk all night until the departed had safely moved on, but Myne had barely spent any time with her neighbors, so there wasn’t much for them to say.

“...Hey, Lutz. You were close with Myne, weren’t you? Say something about her.”

Lutz thought back over the two and a half years he had spent with Myne. At

first, she couldn't even walk to the gate. She had wanted to make books but didn't have paper or ink; she had tried weaving grass fibers together, then making clay tablets... Even when she eventually did manage to make paper, there was a lot more she needed to do before she could make a book.

"Myne would always collapse as soon as she decided to do something, but she always worked hard to get what she wanted. When we first started, she'd get out of breath just walking to the well, but in the end she could walk all the way to the forest on her own."

"Oh yeah, that reminds me... She sure did a lot of weird things, like shave wood and mess around with clay."

"Didn't you two boil wood in a pot, Lutz?"

Fey and his friends who had gone to the woods with Myne started talking about what they remembered her doing there. That must have encouraged Lutz's family to start talking too.

"All the recipes Myne thought up tasted great."

"Myne learned letters and math while helping Gunther at the gate, and she taught all that to Lutz, too. She was smart."

"Oh yeah? I didn't know about that."

After their baptism, Lutz had become an apprentice merchant and Myne an apprentice shrine maiden in the temple, but he didn't talk about that in public since temple shrine maidens didn't have a very good reputation. As far as everyone here was concerned, she was just helping out at the gate and doing the paperwork that Lutz brought back from the Gilberta Company. Barely anyone knew what Myne had really been doing since her baptism.

Myne had founded a workshop in an orphanage, made ink, and then finally made books; became Johann's patron and had him make metal letter types for her; funded Heidi's research into colored ink; and after some trial and error with Ingo, finished a printing press. She was amazing.

And Lutz wanted to tell everyone that, but he couldn't. He had no idea how much about book-making was safe to talk about.

“Myne was weak and slow to grow,” Effa began, holding Kamil in her arms. “We were always scared that she might not live to see the next day. Tuuli started getting more independent when she was two or three, but it took Myne until she was five. Before then, she would always cry about how unfair it was that only Tuuli was healthy, or how unfair it was that we all got to go outside.” It seemed to hurt her as a mother that Myne hadn’t been born a healthy child.

That was probably the old Myne, Lutz thought. The Myne he knew would never cry about things being unfair. She worked hard to get stronger on her own terms, and while she often ran in circles, she was always dedicating her all to getting books to read.

“But once she did stop crying about things being unfair, she started getting mad about things. She’d say ‘I hate this body!’ and start cleaning the house until she broke out in a fever. She’d do weird dances until she fell over, and say eating certain things was good for her body before ending up getting stomach aches,” Effa continued with a small smile.

...Now that’s the Myne I know. It was easy for Lutz to remember and visualize all the weird things Myne had done.

“It was around when she stopped crying and getting mad about things all the time that she started going to the forest with Lutz. She never expected to be the same as normal kids, but she still got strong enough to go outside and join festivals. To think that, after all that, she would be taken away from us like this...”

Having said their piece, Myne’s family shed tears and offered no more words. But everyone understood: their daughter had finally gotten healthy, only to be killed by an outsider noble who had then stolen her body. It would be a quiet funeral. Under the glow of the dancing fire that lit the plaza, Gunther silently carved a grave marker for Myne out of wood, tears running down his cheeks all the while.

They waited out the night, taking turns to nap. When second bell rang, the wives began distributing bread and tea; it was forbidden to eat meat before the funeral was over.

After finishing their simple breakfast, they shouldered the light board and

headed to the temple. They needed to report the death, and then collect a medal permitting the burial. When they arrived, the temple gate's guard let them into the chapel. It was standard for gray priests to handle the deaths of city-goers, but for some reason the High Priest was there this time.

"A seven-year-old born in the summer named Myne? Very well."

After leaving them to wait in the chapel for a bit, the High Priest returned with a flat white medal, which he handed to Gunther. It was the medal Myne had stamped with blood during her baptism. These served as a show of government approval for the burial, and as substitute gravestones for poor commoners who couldn't afford their own.

With the medal in hand, they went to the graveyard outside of the city. As there was only a light box on the board, the men shouldering it were able to walk quicker than they usually would. They were also quieter than usual, since none of them knew Myne very well.

They buried the box in the corner furthest from the graveyard's entrance. It didn't take long to dig the grave since the wooden box was so small. Gunther pressed the medal against the grave marker he had carved. It stuck tightly to the board, which he then stabbed deep into the ground so that it would stand upright, just like those marking the surrounding graves.

Graves for the rich had words carved into the marker, but since few poor people could read, the nearby graves didn't have any words on them—people would instead identify them based on the shape of the wood or where the medal had been stuck onto it. Myne's grave, however, had the words "Our Beloved Daughter" beneath where the medal had been stuck.

With the burial finished, the funeral was complete. There would have been discussions of wills and succession had she been the head of a house, but none of that was necessary for Myne, since she had died so soon after her baptism.

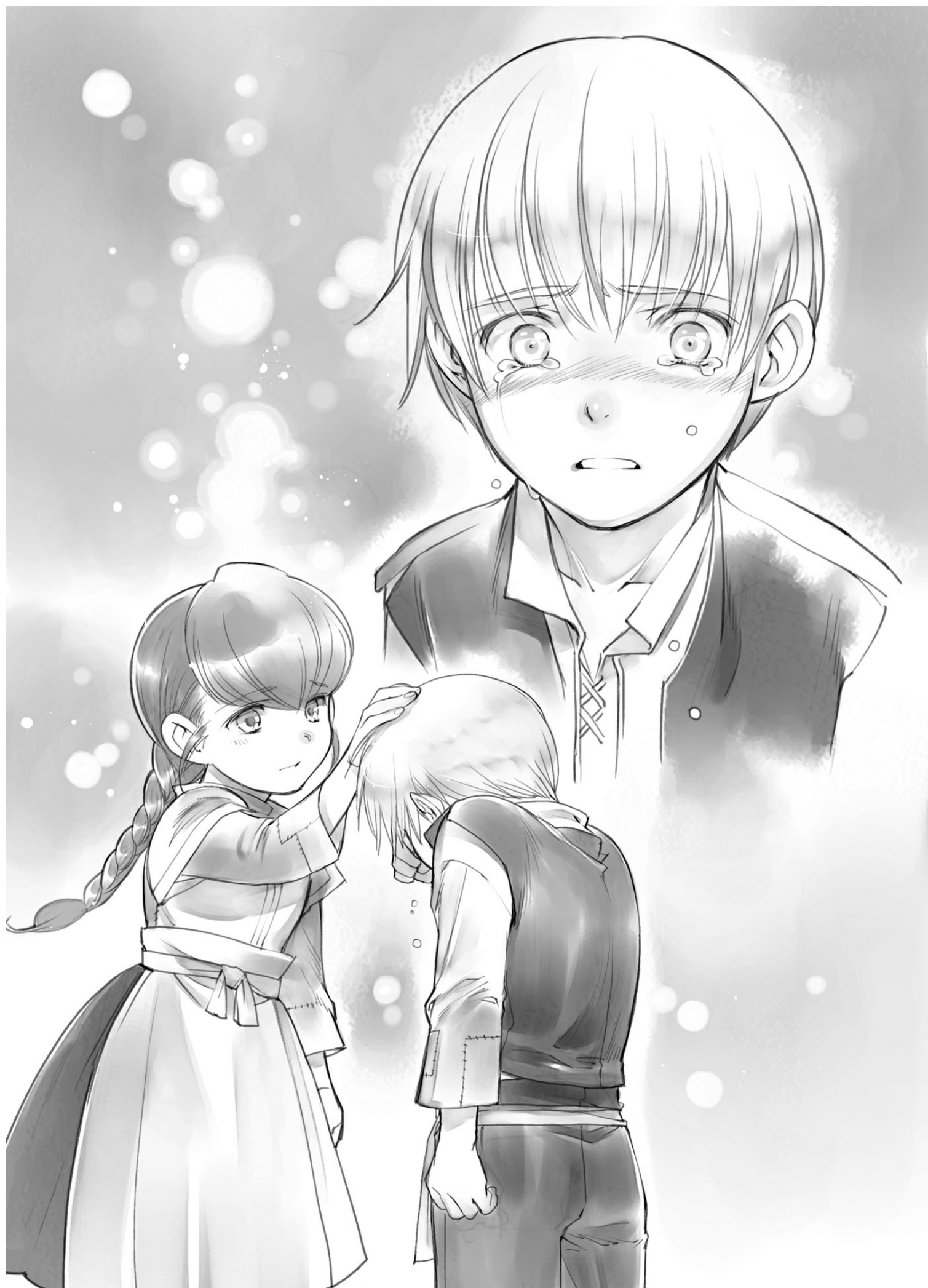
Everyone returned to their daily lives the next day. Lutz was back to his normal schedule, too: he left his house, raced down the stairs, past the well, and then up another set of stairs, before knocking on a door. Tuuli answered, a curious look on her face.

"Morning, Lutz. Did something happen?"

“Did something...? Oh!” Now that Myne was Rozemyne, he wouldn’t be walking her to the temple anymore. He wouldn’t need to watch over her and stop her from wandering all over the place. He wouldn’t have to make sure she was staying healthy. He wouldn’t be making anything with her. He wouldn’t be hugging her whenever she needed it. He wouldn’t be there when she was in trouble and needed a shoulder to cry on. There was nothing for him here anymore.

“...Myne’s really gone, huh?” There was a part of him that had expected Myne to still be there, but as Rozemyne, she needed to live as the proper daughter of an archnoble. Myne was gone, and now that she was Rozemyne, would never again be the girl that Lutz had known and spent so much of his life with.

For the first time, Lutz truly understood that Myne was gone. He trembled, and the tears that hadn’t come out during the funeral suddenly burst forth. Tuuli gently stroked his head until he calmed down, just like she used to do with Myne.



“Lutz, you can still talk to Myne through work, can’t you?”

“...I can talk to her, but she’s not Myne anymore.”

“That’s true. But Myne said all the way till the end that even if she can’t talk to us like normal, she at least still wants to see us,” Tuuli murmured, thinking back on her last conversation with Myne. She couldn’t call them family, but Myne still wanted to see that they were doing okay. With that in mind, she would probably want to keep talking with Lutz, even if just about business.

“Well, Lutz, could you take me to the Gilberta Company today?”

“Huh? Why, Tuuli?”

“I want to keep my last promise to Myne,” Tuuli said before going to the bedroom. She came back with the tote basket Myne had always carried around, inside of which was the toy she had made for Renate and Myne’s diptych. “I promised to join Mrs. Corinna’s workshop, become a first-class seamstress, and make Myne’s clothes for her. I want to go meet Mrs. Corinna so I can make that happen. You made your own promises to Myne, didn’t you?”

Tuuli’s question made Lutz remember all of the things he had spoken to Myne about. He had promised to make and sell books together with her. He had promised to make all of the things she thought up.

“...Guess now’s not the time for me to be crying.” He had to make enough books that Myne could spend all day every day lazing around in her room reading them.

Lutz wiped his eyes and picked up his stuff, and with Tuuli beside him, opened the heavy door leading outside.

Freida—A Visit to the Noble's Quarter

“Oh my, it’s already time.” I noticed while changing for bed that the color of one of the feystones on my bracelet was a little different. The bracelet had a bunch of tiny black feystones lined up along it, one of which was now no longer opaque.

As a Devouring sufferer signed with a noble, my master had given me this magic tool to contain my overflowing mana. Feystones changing color was a sign that the bracelet was getting full with mana, which meant that I needed to go see Lord Henrik, the noble I had signed with and my master.

“Grandfather, please request a meeting with Lord Henrik. The feystones have begun to change color,” I informed Grandfather the next morning. We needed special permission to enter the Noble’s Quarter, and as I was underage I would need him to accompany me there.

“That time already, hm?”

“Yes, indeed. Shall I bring some more pound cake as a gift?”

“That would be wise. He seemed to have quite liked it last time.”

“Very well, then. I shall bring pound cake mixed with rumtopf this time.”

We had invented a new form of pound cake last winter by thinly slicing the rumtopf Myne had taught us to make and mixing it into the cake batter. It took much trial and error to find the ideal amount of rumtopf to add, but thanks to Leise’s efforts, the cake ended up quite delicious. It had a strong alcoholic smell, which made it fairly popular among male nobles.

However, since the rumtopf itself had been made experimentally, there wasn’t enough for us to make too many pound cakes. Leise was determined to make much more rumtopf over the coming summer, though.

“I believe it is about time for us to expand our repertoire...” Grandfather said, sending a meaningful glance to the kitchen where Leise likely was. Both she and I were thinking the same thing.

“I will have to get hold of Myne again soon.”

That was easier said than done, however, given how thorough Benno was when it came to hiding her from the world. All of her Guild paperwork was delivered by the Gilberta Company, and even the yearly financial report that needed to be delivered and discussed in spring was handled by Benno.

Despite being a member of the Merchant’s Guild, Myne showed up less often than any other foreman or forewoman, and yet she was selling enough that her workshop was quickly becoming one of the largest in the city. Plant paper, picture books, the toys she had made and sold as winter handiwork... At first glance, the Myne Workshop’s overall output was rather low, but everything they made was priced high and brought in significant profit—and that wasn’t even including all of the new products that the Gilberta Company had bought the rights to.

“The Gilberta Company keeps coming out with new products as well. It is easy to forget that they’re supposed to be a store for clothing and accessories.” The rinsham, hairpins, and uniquely shaped hangers were close enough to their main business focus, but the plant paper, picture books, toys, and diptychs weren’t related to clothing or accessories in the slightest.

“And Myne is getting involved in more than just products, isn’t she?”

“Indeed.”

Many of the contracts that passed through the Merchant’s Guild with Myne’s name on them were significant—a contract with the Ink Guild, huge orders for the smith she was a patron of as well as various carpenters, a joint investment with Benno for an eatery that was due to open soon... They all involved a lot of money moving around.

“And she joined the temple as an apprentice shrine maiden, too. Just what in the world is she doing? It seems to me that she’s trading at a much higher value than most other merchants.”

Even though our contract over the pound cake had ended, I had not heard from Myne or even seen her in the Guild for a long time. *Does she not mind if I just continue monopolizing pound cake? Because if she doesn’t send word soon, that’s exactly what I intend to do.*

About ten days after the first feystone had changed color, Lord Henrik permitted us to meet him. I waited until fifth bell the day of, then departed for the Noble's Quarter with Grandfather.

"It's time, Freida."

"Yes, Grandfather. See you soon, Mother." I got into a carriage and sat next to Grandfather before the door was shut behind me. The bracelet on my wrist shook as the carriage bounced, making it impossible to ignore.

"There certainly are quite a few stones that have changed color there."

"We must give it to Lord Henrik at once so that he can empty it out again." Whenever we gave the bracelet to Lord Henrik, he would empty it of mana and return it to me. That was our only business there, but the emptying process took enough time that we were always invited over for dinner.

"If only this were lunch, I could feel more at ease right now."

"The fact that he invites us to dinner is proof that we are being treated as proper guests."

"I know. We cannot refuse."

Being invited over for dinner of course meant that the gates would be closed by the time we were due to come back, which meant spending the night in Lord Henrik's mansion. And staying the night meant bathing.

"Bathing has been easier on me ever since I took Myne's advice and started spending less time in the hot water, but I still dislike noble baths."

"...That is something you will have to grow out of," Grandfather said with a short laugh. He always made me bathe for a really long time, during which he would have business discussions with Lord Henrik's head attendant.

I puffed out my cheeks in a small pout. "You know that I prefer business over bathing too, and yet I bathe anyway. I am more than mature enough already."

Our carriage took a right turn after reaching the temple at the end of the main street. Towering white walls made of the same material as the temple stretched on into the distance. They separated the lower city from the Noble's

Quarter, and following it for a bit would lead to a gate.

“What we know as the Noble’s Quarter today was actually the whole city hundreds of years ago, right? I learned about that the other day.”

“That’s correct. It’s said that the city expanded when the first Ehrenfest took control of the duchy from the previous line of archdukes.”

It was standard practice that when nobles from one duchy invaded another, and its archduke couldn’t protect his city from them, the new archduke would become whichever noble had the most mana. The new archduke would then use their more sizable power to expand the city.

“The previous city was rebuilt as the Noble’s Quarter, and then a lower city for commoners was built on the southern side, correct?”

“Yes. Furthermore, what used to be an inn that served as a front gate to investigate travelers was repurposed as the temple. I heard that nobles still use the so-called Noble’s Gate within the temple, but that has nothing to do with either of us.”

We commoners entered the Noble’s Quarter using a small gate on the north end of town that had been used for guards, according to Grandfather.

The north gate was guarded by several commoner soldiers and laynoble knights. We paid the entry fee, then gave several products to the knights as gifts. We were then asked why we were entering the Noble’s Quarter, where we were going, and whether we had the proper authorization. The knights obviously looking down on us for being commoners made me deeply uncomfortable, but I couldn’t let that get to me. Otherwise, I would never survive when I moved here in the future. It hadn’t taken me long to get used to returning even their scornful gazes with a smile.

“You both check out. Go into that carriage over there.”

“Understood.”

Lower city carriages were dirty enough that we had to switch to a noble carriage before passing through the north gate. Once that was done, we were traveling smoothly down the road between the pristine white buildings of the Noble’s Quarter without any bouncing or shaking at all.

“If only we could have carriages like these in the lower city...”

“That wouldn’t be an easy feat. My understanding is that they use magic tools to dampen the shaking.”

As a laynoble, Lord Henrik’s estate was comparatively close to the north gate. Land closer to the gates being cheaper seemed to be the same in both the lower city and the Noble’s Quarter.

“We are glad to see you, Miss Freida.” The head attendant welcomed us in and led us to a guest parlor. It resembled the parlor in our home, but that was because Grandfather had specifically modeled our home after Lord Henrik’s. There were still significant differences between the two though, given that they used magic tools like they were second nature here.

“Apologies for the wait.” Lord Henrik arrived shortly after. He was seventeen when he signed with us, which made him around twenty now, and he was as kind and as honest of a noble as his appearance would suggest. His father had died two years ago, and it seemed he was working hard to serve as the head of his family despite his young age.

Lord Henrik had a first wife with whom he had children, but no second wife, and as a commoner I would be counted as a mistress rather than a proper wife. It would be fair to say that he was somewhat relying on my family for financial support. But ironically, the source of his money problems was the diligent and warmhearted nature of his family, which was why Grandfather had arranged for me to sign with him in the first place. He wouldn’t abuse his authority to drain money from us, nor was he likely to be involved in any back-alley deals. There was no noble more ideal for me to sign with.

“May this meeting ordained by the gods be blessed on this fruitful day given life by Flutrane the Goddess of Water’s healing. It is good to see you after so long, Lord Henrik.” Grandfather and Lord Henrik exchanged the lengthy greetings of the nobility, which were especially tricky to learn since the gods one needed to name changed each season, and while listening I suddenly remembered the picture book I had bought from Myne.

...Oh, I recall that she wanted to make picture books for all of the subordinate gods as well. I wonder if she ever finished those.

Myne had been making picture books that could easily have their covers swapped out. They were black and white, but the illustrations were still beautiful and the gods were described in simple and clear language. I intended to give the books leather covers once I had a full set.

“Freida, your hand,” Lord Henrik said, bringing me back to reality. I extended my left hand so that he could see the bracelet. He struck it lightly with a shining stick he took out of seemingly thin air, then murmured a quiet word that made the bracelet grow in size to the point that it could finally be removed.

“Ah, yes, quite a few feystones have changed color. Are you feeling alright?” Lord Henrik asked worriedly after taking a look at the removed bracelet. He never acted arrogantly or like he was superior to me, even though I was a commoner who had signed my life away to him, so my impression of him was a very positive one.

“I’m feeling fine, thank you. I appreciate the concern.”

“Glad to hear it. May we meet again at dinner.”

“Indeed.”

Lord Henrik left with the bracelet, at which point his head attendant came in and began discussing business with Grandfather. Female attendants would soon call me to take a bath before dinner so that I could dress properly for the meal. The most difficult part of coming to the mansion would soon begin.

After finishing a long and exhausting bath, I sat at the dinner table, where most of the topics discussed were concerning the circumstances in the lower city. I effortlessly partook in discussions of market trends and my own education, then talked about the new flavors of pound cake that Leise had been speedily developing.

“My younger brother who just came of age and recently left home is quite fond of your pound cake. I myself am not too fond of overly sweet foods, but this pound cake has a strong scent of alcohol, and the more restrained sweetness makes it easier to eat.”

It seemed that Lord Henrik’s knight younger brother liked sweets more than him. That little brother in question had been given guard duty at some point

during last fall, but committed some grave error that had resulted in a hefty fine. Grandfather and I had paid the fine on his behalf, but we had no idea what he was really like. I had not met him yet.

“Master Henrik, do you have a moment?” A servant with a pale, anxious expression whispered something into Lord Henrik’s ear, and he immediately stood up.

“My apologies, Freida. There is an emergency elsewhere. I must take my leave for today.”

Lord Henrik left the dining hall with the servant at once. As pressing for details would be uncouth and unwise, Grandfather instead passed the time by harmlessly discussing the food served.

“Well then, Grandfather. Goodnight.”

“Yes, sleep well.”

A male attendant escorted Grandfather to his guest room while a female attendant took me to mine. It was the same room I always used, even when changing for the bath.

“Here you are, Miss Freida.”

“...Oh?” My things had been brought here when I went for my bath, but now they were nowhere to be seen. I tilted my head slightly as I walked to the bed at the attendant’s guidance, where she pulled the bed curtains to the side.

“If you would like, you ca— Kyaah?!” The attendant let out a squeal. There was a man lying down on the bed I was to use. He looked much like Lord Henrik, and his brows were tightly knitted as he groaned in pain.

“Sir Damuel?! U-Um, Miss Freida, my apologies. I shall ask the head attendant about this.” The attendant, looking positively baffled, spun around and exited the room. Given that my things had been moved out, I could imagine that I had been given a separate room that nobody had been notified of properly.

...Goodness. What should I do? Unable to leave the room on my own to chase after the attendant, but feeling too awkward to just stand alone in a room with a man I didn’t know despite the fact that he was unconscious, I put a hand to

my cheek and sighed.

“My sincerest apologies, Miss Freida.” The head attendant hurriedly walked into the room.

It seemed that while Lord Henrik’s younger brother now lived in the knight dorms, he had been badly injured on duty and taken to his home until a healer was available, since it was so close to the Noble’s Gate. But as he was unconscious and there was no time to prepare a room, he had been brought here instead.

“We have prepared another room for you, Miss Freida, but it seems we were so surprised that we didn’t send word as we should have. My sincerest apologies.”

“I can sympathize with how unsettling it must have been for your master’s younger brother to be brought here unconscious without warning. If the other room is ready, I do not mind moving there now.”

Just as the servant let out a sigh of relief at my understanding, a ball of light flew into the room through the window and spun circles above Damuel, sprinkling a glimmering dust onto him. The falling light shining in the dark room looked brilliant and mystical.

“...So this is magic, is it? How beautiful.” I reached out to touch the dust, but it avoided my hand as if on purpose.

After a minute of me watching the dust, enraptured, Damuel suddenly shot up in bed. “Apprentice! Are you okay?!”

“Eek?!”

Damuel was gripping a shining wand in his hand, and scanned the room with a hard expression as though he was in the middle of combat, but after a second he blinked in surprise.

“...Where am I?” he said in confusion. He must have become disoriented when he was knocked unconscious.

As Damuel looked around the room again, baffled, the head attendant took a step forward. “Sir Damuel, how are you feeling? You were brought home after

falling unconscious, and up until now you have been resting in bed.”

“I’m fine. Judging by the remnants of light, there must have been some healing magic.” Damuel looked down at his arm, then shot his head back up. There was an intense look on his face. “I have to hurry back to the Knight’s Order!”

“Sir Damuel, I think it would be wiser to wait and—”

“There’s no time!” Despite having been groaning unconscious just moments ago, Damuel sprang up from the bed with ease, raced to the balcony, and flung the window open. “I’m in the middle of guard duty! If the apprentice shrine maiden is hurt again, I’ll...” He swung his arm, and that alone was enough for a large winged horse of pure white to appear by the balcony. He mounted the horse, his expression worryingly grim, and then flew off. It was dark out, but the horse’s large wings were such a radiant white that I could see them flapping through the air as Damuel quickly disappeared from sight.

The ball of light appearing in the room and Damuel jumping out of bed had happened so suddenly that all I and the head attendant could do was stand in shock and watch him go.

“...Miss Freida, I will guide you to your room.”

“Yes, please do.”

After helplessly watching Damuel go, the head attendant came back to his senses and guided me to my newly prepared room. I climbed into bed and thought back to what I had heard Damuel say. He had certainly yelled about needing to help an apprentice shrine maiden who was in danger. To my understanding, Myne was the only apprentice shrine maiden in the temple at the moment. If Sir Damuel had been badly injured while on guard duty, it was very likely that Myne had gotten wrapped up in whatever was going on as well.

“What in the world has happened?”

I could have asked Lord Henrik, but nobles did not give away information so freely. He might tell me if I explained that I was Myne’s friend, but depending on what mess Myne was wrapped up in, that opened up the possibility of putting myself in danger too. It would likely be safer to keep my relationship

with Myne a secret.

“I would at least like to make sure she is alive...”

At breakfast that morning, Lord Henrik apologized for the incident the night before. “I was so concerned about my younger brother that I didn’t send proper word out about it. My apologies.”

“Think nothing of it. I myself got to witness the magic of the nobility for the first time. It was beautiful, mystifying, and very worth seeing.”

After breakfast, Lord Henrik returned my bracelet; all of its feystones were now black again. Shortly after, Grandfather and I returned home.

“Grandfather, there is something I need to research. Please lend me the key to the inner document room.”

I hurried and changed before going to the Merchant’s Guild. There existed a room that compiled documents related to magic contracts, and this room could only be entered by the guildmaster and those who had his permission. I went there to search for copies of the contracts that Myne had signed with Benno. Unlike those in the document rooms that could be browsed by anyone, the contracts here would change when someone who had signed them died.

Magic contracts were used rarely enough that it didn’t take me long to find the documents concerning Myne.

“...‘Rozemyne’?” The document I found said that the contracts had been signed by Benno, Lutz... and Rozemyne. There would be no need to change the name of a Devouring child who had signed a submission contract, so this was almost objective proof that Myne had been taken by nobles. She had no doubt been adopted by one, in the same way that others had offered to adopt me in the past.

A noble had learned of Myne’s knowledge, seen the value in it, and made it his. It was hard to imagine the impact of such a move would be felt only in Ehrenfest. I gripped the documents and raced to Grandfather’s office.

“Something important has happened. Look at this.” I showed Grandfather the magic contracts with Myne’s name changed to “Rozemyne.” His eyes widened.

“...Myne signed with a noble? It isn’t unheard of for a Devouring girl to be adopted, but Myne?”

Myne had actively refused to sign with nobles, wanting to live with her family for as long as possible. She had said she would choose death over being separated from them, and yet now she had let herself be adopted by a noble.

I myself didn’t want to be a noble; I wanted to be a merchant. I wanted to spend my time doing business and counting money. When I told Grandfather that, he had found the ideal noble for me and signed me with him. Thanks to that, I would have a store in the Noble’s Quarter when I came of age, and until then I could live at home with family. I was satisfied with my choice.

...But what about Myne?

“Grandfather, please call Benno over. I am sure he knows something about this.”

Sylvester—Cleaning up the Mess

“We will take our leave, then.”

“Please take care of yourself, milady.”

“...Farewell.”

I just convicted my mother, then ripped apart another family with my own two hands. I could honestly do with some reassurance here. Someone lavish me with compliments. If I didn't have people assuring me that what I was doing was the right thing, serving as archduke would be way too much for me, I thought, looking at the two parents kneeling in front of their own daughter.

“Thank you for coming today. I pray from the bottom of my heart that we meet again one day.” Rozemyne, while still standing, bent forward and lowered her head deeply as she said goodbye to those who used to be her family. It wasn't a gesture I recognized. When showing gratitude to the gods, one would get on both knees and lay prostrate. I had never seen someone lower just their head while still standing. This was indeed a girl who held memories of living in another world.

Still, even though I didn't recognize the gesture, I could feel the emotion it expressed whether I liked it or not. Anyone could tell that she was showing her gratitude for her family. I knew what I had done—I knew I had ripped a loving family apart—so seeing their heartfelt goodbyes sent a sharp pain through my chest.

The door closed, and Rozemyne was left standing alone, wavering unsteadily. I lowered my eyes in discomfort at the same time that Ferdinand abruptly stood up beside me. He quickly walked over to her, as if having predicted this, and embraced her just as she fell to the side. Then, he sharply shouted toward the door:

“Fran, inside!”

A gray priest who had been waiting outside promptly rushed in. I recognized

him as Rozemyne's attendant who had been so badly wounded by mana that just moving had made him twitch in pain.

"Sister Myne!"

I could see remnants of the blessing dusting his figure as he rushed over to her. Given that his wounds were gone, I could guess that Fran had received the same blessing Myne's father had. The panic on his face showed just how much he cared about his master.

Even her attendant being blessed begged the question of just how far her lights of blessing had gone. As I had just seen myself, Rozemyne didn't hesitate to recklessly wield an enormous amount of mana when those she cared about were involved. I would have to investigate and see just how many people her blessing had reached.

"It is nothing to worry about. She has simply used too much mana," Ferdinand said, grabbing a nearby potion from his well-stocked cabinet and pouring some into Rozemyne's mouth. That was probably the terrible, foul-tasting one. It was as effective as it was vile, but if you asked me, it was downright cruel to pour any of that junk into the mouth of an unconscious child. Ferdinand was once again proving to act more on logic than emotion.

Poor girl.

"Fran, take her to her room and get her in bed. I will come by tomorrow afternoon to explain what the future holds. Gather all of her attendants for me when the time comes."

"Understood." Fran picked up the limp, unconscious Rozemyne and left the room. That somehow reminded me of something I had seen before.

"Arno, some tea. That will be all."

"As you wish."

I eyed Ferdinand, who was giving an order to his trusted-yet-forgettable attendant, while murmuring to Karstedt in a low voice. "Hey, Karstedt. Is it just me, or is Rozemyne like the spitting image of Blau? Seriously."

"Blau? Aah, the shumil you once kept as a pet."

Shumils were easily domesticated feybeasts that made cute “pooey” noises. Plenty of nobles kept them as pets, myself included, but Blau was about the weakest creature I had ever seen. She had fur that was a color between black and blue, big round golden eyes, was always very weak, and seemed to like Karstedt more than me. In other words, she was exactly like Rozemyne in animal form.

I sought Karstedt’s agreement, but he just let out an awkward grunt. “You say she liked me more than you, but that’s entirely your fault. She was constantly on the verge of death from all of your teasing. You could say she only grew attached to me as a desperate measure to stay alive.”

“Hey, it sounds real bad when you put it like that. All I did was give her the love a pet needs.”

“You were even less delicate and considerate as a kid than you are now. With the way you chased it around and crushed it with hugs, any small animal would’ve been at risk of an early death,” Karstedt sighed, rubbing his temples.

Woah, what? Blau getting tired so quickly back when we used to play together was because of me, not because she was weak? Huh.

“Learn to control yourself better this time. If I understand Ferdinand’s reports correctly, Rozemyne is a lot weaker than that shumil.”

“Weaker than Blau? I’ll believe it when I see it.”

Seriously, I’m blown away here. I thought Blau ran away from me because, as a feybeast, she understood my true might, but really she was just scared for her life. I can’t believe it.

“...I’m sure Rozemyne’s already forgiven me for all that teasing. I just saved her life, after all.”

“You were messing with her as hard as you could to see how much patience she had with strangers, right? Well, she wasn’t amused by that. And you just ripped her apart from her family, remember?”

“Ngh...” I held my tongue, having noticed Ferdinand’s attendant pushing a serving cart carrying drinks this way. The cups made a light clink as he lined them up on the table, and I shook my head in disappointment.

I've never seen a more boring guy in my life.

All of Ferdinand's attendants were men, and probably thanks to how strictly he trained them, they always blandly did their work in the most efficient way possible. They were skilled at their jobs, but there was nothing fun or interesting about them at all.

"Ferdinand, how about you get a shrine maiden as an attendant for a change?"

"I have no need for women attempting to seduce me for status, and a single woman would be out of place and make it harder for everyone else to work." Ferdinand immediately shot my idea down, pretty much saying that he didn't need a spark in his life at all.

"Arno, clear the room. Don't let anyone near."

"As you wish."

The arrival of the outsider noble, the imprisonment of the High Bishop, and Rozemyne's name change and adoption had all happened so abruptly; we would need time to discuss things before he informed her attendants and the other priests.

Once the presence of people outside the door faded, Ferdinand let out a slow sigh. "And so, our plan worked. We've accomplished our goals."

"...Yep."

We'd secured Myne, who had refused to sign with a noble and tried running away for as long as she possibly could; secured just cause to execute the High Bishop, who had been breaking the law in increasingly visible ways; put Mother, who was protecting the High Bishop, under house arrest; and taken into custody a noble with connections to the High Bishop, which would serve as a powerful trump card against the archduke of Ahrensbach. All in all, the events of today would no doubt serve to quiet the faction of nobles supporting Mother over me.

"Not too shabby. I've got a real bad taste in my mouth, though." If you ignored how awful it felt to purposefully lead my mother into a trap and then rip apart a happy family, then sure, today was a pretty good day.

“Don’t be so hard on yourself, Sylvester. This was the best possible outcome.”

“The end doesn’t always justify the means, y’know?” Whenever something happened that led to me getting called black-hearted or cold and calculating, you could bet that Ferdinand’s plots were to blame. Most of the time, anyway.

“I have no love for Bezewanst or your mother,” Ferdinand said, wrinkling his nose dismissively. They were family to me, but to Ferdinand, they were just obstacles. I knew that, but it still hurt to hear him say it to my face.

“What about Rozemyne, then? You don’t feel anything about erasing Myne from existence and turning her into Rozemyne?”

“...I think this is the fastest and most efficient means of giving her a brighter future.”

So he said, but his expression was a little more concerned than it had been a moment ago. The warmth and love in Myne’s family was unthinkable among nobles, who prioritized glory and the continuation of their house above all else. Even Ferdinand felt some guilt over ripping apart a family that sincerely cared for each other.

“She will be emotionally unstable for some time, I believe,” Ferdinand said with a troubled grimace. He had said that even just staying in the temple over the winter had led to her being so unstable that he could see her mana stirring, which meant he’d had to keep his eyes on her at almost all times. It was rare for the emotionally distant Ferdinand to be so considerate of others; maybe having Rozemyne around would be good for the man obsessed with results over everything else.

“I’ll leave comforting Rozemyne in these trying times to you two. I can’t get involved here.”

“Sylvester?”

“I am Aub Ehrenfest. Just as I do not spoil my true son, I cannot spoil my adopted daughter.”

Spoiling Rozemyne will just make me want to start spoiling my own son, who will one day have to bear the heavy burdens I carry now. But I’m told that I mustn’t pamper the future archduke so often that it’s exhausting. Unlike

Ferdinand, I'm not so great at cutting off my feelings and acting rationally. There's so much I can't do thanks to the position of archduke binding me.

"Clumsy as ever, I see," Karstedt said with a wry smile. It would have been better for a cold and calculating man like Ferdinand to be the archduke.

Yet another day where I curse that Ferdinand was born to a mistress instead of the first wife.

"More importantly though, is Rozemyne alright? She called on the Father, Mother, and Eternal Five all at once—that'd be enough to knock out even a healthy person. Are we sure she's not dead?" Karstedt asked, glancing at the door.

I crossed my arms and followed his gaze. One didn't normally pray to multiple gods at once; it required more mana, and the chances of success dropped hard, especially since the God of Life was disliked by his brothers and sisters for hiding the Goddess of Earth every year. I hadn't heard of a single case where a prayer to all of the gods at once had actually worked, let alone one where multiple people received the blessing.

"That prayer actually working is what's weirding me out. I thought for sure it was gonna fail," I said, and Karstedt—who would now be considered Rozemyne's biological father—looked up at the ceiling with a frown.

"That was unprecedented, but I don't think Rozemyne fully understands what she did, nor how significant it is."

"Indeed. Not at all," Ferdinand agreed.

"You got hit with the blessing yourself, didn't you, Ferdinand? Did you teach her to use magic?" While the lights of blessing had avoided Karstedt and I, they did reach Ferdinand. They had probably gotten close enough to justify that, but missing a blessing that significant kind of ticked me off.

I glared at Ferdinand, since I was her adoptive father and therefore deserved it more than him, but he just glared back at me.

"Enough already. How many times have I said this now? Myne could use magic from the start."

The trombe extermination mission had been Myne's first ever ritual, and to help her, Ferdinand had given her a magic tool in the form of a ring that amplified and strengthened her mana—that much I understood. But apparently, Myne had suddenly blessed the entire Knight's Order with a prayer to Angriff the God of War. She herself had said that seeing the trombe scared her, and that she just wanted to pray for their good luck in battle. The reports were clear, but they just didn't make sense.

"She said she just made up a line that sounded like something a noble would say and was surprised when it turned into a blessing, but I was more surprised than anyone when it happened," Ferdinand continued. "I have not taught her how to use magic whatsoever."

"She seemed pretty experienced to me. To think that was a blessing she gave by accident," Karstedt said while rubbing his chin, having received that blessing himself.

To be frank, it was completely insane that she had managed to compress her overflowing mana all on her own, without teaching or assistance. And it was insane that she had prayed for their good fortune and given a divine blessing without meaning to.

"It's hard to believe she didn't mean for it to be a blessing, but even putting that aside, how is she so good at using her mana at that young of an age?"

"I believe it is because she has the mind of an adult, and a high capacity for learning. The mind of a child cannot control mana properly, but despite her youthful body, Myne has memories of reaching adulthood in another world. That must have been enough for her to control it," Ferdinand proposed. "She grew used to the flow of mana while making her offerings to the divine instruments as an apprentice blue shrine maiden, and although it was by chance, she gave a blessing by stating the name of a god. That was enough for her to know that she could control her mana freely if she had a feystone. And furthermore, she saw knights giving their weapons a Darkness blessing before proceeding to pray with a divine instrument to grant a sizable blessing of her own. It was then that she learned how to give blessings by praying to the gods."

"Still. Learning to pray is one thing, but how do you explain her just blasting

out the whole prayer like that?” The prayers necessary for earning the blessings of the gods were unbearably long—you had to memorize their names and which god gave which blessing. Apprentice knights were taught to pray to the God of Darkness early so that they could bless their weapons for trombe missions, but most struggled to do even that.

“If you were to ask Myne, she would say that she had only needed to memorize the lines for a single prayer. From there, she just needed to mix in the names of gods and lines of scripture, both of which she had learned from reading the bible.”

Thinking back to the Spring Prayer ambush, Myne had absolutely said “I just have to pray to the gods to make magic happen, right?!” without even realizing how blunt that was. She wasn’t wrong, but nobody educated in the Royal Academy would waste mana like that.

“...Starting today, Rozemyne will be a noble girl who uses magic tools in her day-to-day life. I get the feeling that it’d be smart to teach her a little about magic before she enters the Royal Academy,” I said. Magic tools were an essential part of noble life. Most kids would be fine just carrying around a tool that could absorb their excess mana, but since nobody could predict what messes Rozemyne might end up in, we intended to give her feystones that could expel mana, too.

“Sylvester’s right. It’s more dangerous to keep using self-taught magic. Who knows what she might see and draw wrong inspiration from,” Karstedt added, nodding in agreement.

Ferdinand furrowed his brow and began tapping his temple. That was his thinking pose—something I was all too familiar with, and a sign that he was in the middle of constructing a brutal education plan that he would enforce on Rozemyne without a shred of mercy.

...Heh. Sucks for her.

“Ah, right. Ferdinand, give Rozemyne a physical examination. You mentioned that there was something suspicious about her poor health, right? If she has a problem with her mana flow, I trust you can make a potion for it.”

Given that she was now my adopted daughter, there would be a huge fuss if a

doctor found something wrong with her. If she was sick with something particularly rare, I'd have to fend off weirdos wanting to use her for research. Giving her a checkup now and keeping it private before moving her to the Noble's Quarter would be best.

"I do feel that when it comes to Rozemyne, nothing can ever be simple. I will do as you suggest, Sylvester, and examine her here in the temple."

It seemed that not even *the* Ferdinand could make predictions when Rozemyne was involved. He never would have believed that she had the mind of someone from another world without that magic tool. There'd be a lot to gain if we used her knowledge properly, but the more about her we kept a secret, the better.

"Oh yeah, and get this to Benno from the Gilberta Company."

"What is it?"

"An introduction to Rozemyne and our future plans." If all three of us firmly said that Rozemyne was Karstedt's daughter who had been raised in the temple for safety's sake, we would be able to strong-arm noble society and the temple into believing it. But none of us knew the lower city well enough to know how well known she was down there.

"Lower city matters are best left to those in the lower city. Benno seems like a competent tool; with these instructions, he should take care of things just fine for us."

Ferdinand took the documents with a dubious expression, since I usually dumped my instructions on him instead of anyone else. He skimmed the documents, then his eyes shot wide open. "Sylvester, I can understand getting him up to speed, but what is this matter about a dinner meeting at the Italian restaurant?!"

...Tch. Here comes the annoying lecture. Look at Mr. Logic Man, all serious and stubborn, and as flexible as a stone wall. Why'd we let him grow up to be like this? He acts so old and mature because he doesn't appreciate fun in the slightest.

"Are you listening, Sylvester?"

“Look, think about it—we’ve got a lot to talk to Benno about, don’t we? Like all that stuff about spreading the printing business,” I said, which also earned me a raised eyebrow from Karstedt.

“Just summon him here. What need is there for the archduke himself to visit the lower city?!”

“Oh, there’s a big need, and that need is located in my stomach. I’m gonna eat that food no matter what.”

“At least think of a good excuse!”

Don’t become an archduke, kids. You can’t even walk through your own city without needing a thousand layers of excuses and an elaborate plot. It’s a pain, but I probably should think of a good reason for this.

I dug a pinkie around in my ear as I thought up an excuse. “Well, uh, how about I say that a merchant from the lower city can’t do proper business with a bunch of stuffy scholar-officials surrounding him? I wouldn’t be able to hear the actual opinions of an already successful merchant, so we wouldn’t be able to come to a mutually agreeable conclusion and the discussion would essentially just end with me giving him an order.” It was hard for a commoner to answer questions honestly when surrounded by scholar-officials, which in turn meant that it would be nigh impossible for me to get the honest opinions I wanted. “I’ve already talked to Benno about this printing business. At the very least, this won’t be coming out of nowhere for the Gilberta Company.”

Seeing Benno while touring the orphanage had come as a complete surprise for me; I hadn’t expected anyone there to know that I was the archduke. I asked for his opinions as a merchant while making sure he kept quiet, and in the process learned that Ferdinand and I weren’t the only ones who knew that the printing business would change history. Benno thought the same.

There would always be enormous resistance to rapid change, but this rapid change was happening due to Myne’s otherworldly knowledge. I had asked Benno a simple question: “If, worst-case scenario, I were to kill Myne, would that stop the change from happening?”

Benno had slowly shaken his head in response. “No, it’s too late for that. Plant paper that can be mass-produced is already on the market, and now that we’ve

taught the Ink Guild how to make ink suitable for printing, their workshops are starting to mass-produce that as well. There's also the fact that the Smithing Guild has seen a demonstration of the metal letter types needed for printing, and finally, while it is still a prototype, a printing press has been completed. All of the pieces are in place, and are spreading outside this city. There is even an apprentice merchant who knows everything about book-making, and who says that his dream is to sell books throughout the country. Even if Myne were to die now, the ripple she made has turned into an unstoppable wave." That was precisely why he had hidden Myne's existence and carefully selected which of her inventions to sell. "The wave will spread even faster with Myne alive; it is astounding how dedicated to making books she is."

It would only be a matter of time before printing spread throughout the world. I may have been the archduke of Ehrenfest, but not even I could easily crush the Plant Paper Guild, the Myne Workshop, the ink workshops, the smithies, and the Ink Guild all while simultaneously wiping out everything they knew about printing. If stopping the wave wasn't possible then my only choice was to ride it, and use it to benefit the duchy as much as possible.

"I've already told the Gilberta Company that Ehrenfest will sanction the printing business, with Myne at its center, and to prepare for its acceleration once she becomes a noble. The first step of our plan is to make another workshop in the orphanage of a nearby town." I would need to send the Gilberta Company and a scholar there to see how big of a workshop could be made, how many workers they would need, and what tools they would require. "In any case, Rozemyne can only return to the outside world once her baptism ceremony and inauguration as the High Bishop are over. We have some time. Tell them to ensure that the workshop investigation and Italian restaurant are finished before then. ...Aaand there we go. Is that a good enough excuse for you?" I asked, looking at Ferdinand. His brow furrowed harder, and his expression twisted into a grimace.

"Can't you use that talent of yours for anything but food and other pleasures?"

"Hey pal, I'm always going all-out, whether it's for pleasure or not." I put as much effort in as I could when it came to sneaking away from work underneath

Ferdinand's nose, or plotting about how to delegate all of my work to others so that I could relax. *I'm offended that he'd think I only go all-out for food and stuff.*

Our conversation was interrupted by the chime of seventh bell; it seemed our discussion had continued for a fairly long time. I stood up, and so did Ferdinand and Karstedt.

"That's all for today. We can discuss the baptism ceremony's details when the Archduke Conference is over. I need to get back to the Sovereignty."

Karstedt and I had snuck out of a dinner party celebrating the beginning of the conference, and would need to have returned before tomorrow morning when the conference itself would begin.

"Could I ask you to take the vice-commander of the Knight's Order as your guard?" Karstedt asked, his tone formal and respectful. "I would like to stay here and prepare for Rozemyne's baptism ceremony, if possible."

"Sure. Later Ferdinand, Karstedt. Get that physical examination done, and once Karstedt has everything ready, move her to the Noble's Quarter." Those in the temple would need to prepare for receiving Rozemyne as the new High Bishop in the meantime. "Ferdinand, I entrust you with explaining the circumstances to Benno and preparing the temple for the upcoming changes. Karstedt, I entrust you with preparing the baptism, and enforcing the punishment of the criminals we imprisoned today."

Having received my orders, they both knelt out of respect.

Arno—Fran and I

It was yesterday that an outsider noble had entered the temple, caused a stir, drawn the attention of the archduke, and then been sent away to prison with the High Bishop. The High Priest had sent all of his attendants out of the room, including me, his head attendant, and thus I spent the night not knowing the details of the situation at all.

“Arno, tell Myne’s attendants to take this to the Gilberta Company. This is a top priority,” the High Priest said.

“As you wish.”

It was after breakfast and right around second bell that the High Priest gave me a letter of invitation to deliver. From the way he looked, and from the fact that he had prepared a letter like this so early in the morning, I could tell that he had spent all night working without sleeping much at all.

“If anyone else asks about what happened last night, tell them I’ll give an explanation to everyone some other day,” he said before leaving his room.

Yesterday, Fran had come on urgent business while the High Priest was in his workshop. The High Priest had told me to inform visitors that he was absent, and while it would have been easy for me to contact him from outside, I instead chose to ignore Fran, which led to quite the fuss in the hallway. In the end, he thought I was just being inflexible. I wonder what face he would make if he knew I had ignored his needs on purpose.

“Good morning, Fran.”

I had found Fran and Gil drawing water from the well. Myne’s chambers must have really been lacking in personnel if her head attendant was doing such menial chores. Delia’s absence was putting quite a strain on him, and I couldn’t help but leak a faint smile at that fact.

Fran looked at me with surprise after pouring the water he had drawn into Gil’s bucket. He had a tall and muscular body that would have disappointed

Sister Margaret to no end, but when he widened his eyes like that, it was easy to remember what a frail little boy he had been while serving her.

“Good morning, Arno. What brings you here this early...?”

“An errand from the High Priest. He would like you to deliver this letter of invitation to the Gilberta Company as soon as possible.”

Fran took the letter from my outstretched hand, then immediately passed it to Gil. “Understood. Gil, please change, then go and deliver this.”

“Got it. Be right back.” Gil rushed back to Myne’s chambers, the letter in one hand and the bucket of water in the other. It was nothing short of bizarre to see what was once the greatest problem child in the temple doing his duties as an attendant so eagerly.

“It must be rough, having so few attendants now.”

“We will be taking on two new attendants today. I would like to think things will get easier once they’re here.”

It seemed that they were replacing Delia. *What a shame. I would much rather you continue struggling for a bit longer*, I thought as I turned my back to Fran. “Until next time.”

On my way back to the High Priest’s room, the blue priest Brother Egmont spotted me and immediately came rushing over. “Arno, what in the world happened yesterday?! The High Bishop’s room is locked, there are no gray priests standing by the door, and nobody I’ve asked knows what has happened. Surely the High Priest has some idea of what’s going on!” he yelled, spit flying out of his mouth. He was one of the High Bishop’s cronies, and would sometimes even act haughty around the High Priest when he had the High Bishop there for protection.

I resisted the urge to wipe my face while repeating what the High Priest had instructed me to say. “He will explain the circumstances to everyone when the time comes. Unfortunately, I was cleared from the room and so do not know the details myself.”

“That means you know something though, right?! Come now, tell me!”

“I do not know the charges, but the High Bishop was imprisoned by the archduke and the Knight’s Order. I truly do wonder what happened...” I said in a curious tone, all the while observing Brother Egmont, who paled on the spot. His haughty behavior had only been permitted thanks to the High Bishop’s protection, and now that he was gone, the High Priest would no doubt be the next High Bishop.

What miserable fate now awaited Brother Egmont? I could not wait to find out. There was nothing quite so refreshing as trash getting what they deserved.

I started making my way back to the High Priest. Just as I was approaching his room, I saw him leaving with Zahm, another of his attendants. I walked over to them.

“High Priest, where might you be going?”

“I believe today is the funeral, and I would like to be at the chapel for it. Arno, prepare to welcome the Gilberta Company.”

Funerals that involved going to the temple’s chapel tended to be for commoners, and the High Priest practically never went to receive the report of death himself. *So why is he going out of his way to attend this time?* I wondered as I returned to his room and began preparations.

Not long after, I received a report that the Gilberta Company’s carriage had arrived at the back gate. I headed to the entrance to welcome them inside.

“Thank you for coming today,” I said, guiding them to the room and then leaving. The High Priest seemed to want to proceed with as much secrecy as possible, and was once again clearing the room of all attendants. Truly, what had happened last night? I knew nothing outside of the fact that we would be visiting Sister Myne’s room in the afternoon.

“It’s time, Arno.”

“Understood.”

Once their meal was finished, I followed the High Priest’s orders and headed for Sister Myne’s room with the sheets of plant paper he had handed me. The High Priest knit his brow tighter than usual; his heavy frown made it quite clear that he was conflicted about something, but since I knew nothing of the

circumstances, I decided there was no need for me to think any more about it.

I walked down the hallway and stood in front of the door to the orphanage director's chambers, which took me back to when I was the former director's attendant. It still felt so strange having to ring the bell of arrival just so I could enter. And when I did, Fran answered the door, just like he would back then.

"Please come inside, High Priest," he said.

The hall was unchanged from when Sister Margaret had lived here, perhaps due to Sister Myne reusing the furniture. These similarities made my memories of the past even more vivid, and I smiled nostalgically as the High Priest began talking to Fran beside me.

"How is she?"

"She has a small fever, but she is dressed and ready. I have gathered all of her attendants as requested."

I climbed the stairs with Fran and found myself instinctively looking around for Sister Margaret. In my mind's eye I saw her rich golden hair and her deep-blue eyes, crinkled in a smile that never left her face. The beauty mark above her lips was as sensual as anything I had ever seen, and her gesturing hand was enough to make my heart pound.

But unlike in my memories, it was Sister Myne and her attendants inside the director's room, the former looking a little more flushed than usual, perhaps due to her fever. There were two girls among them who I didn't recognize, both of whom were looking this way anxiously. They were most likely Delia's replacements. As they were not yet of age, there had been few opportunities for us to meet.

"Who are these two?" the High Priest asked.

"Monika and Nicola," Sister Myne replied. "I spoke yesterday about taking them on as attendants to replace Delia. They will take care of me and help the chefs in the kitchen."

"I see. In that case, let us discuss the future."

What the High Priest said next was truly shocking: Sister Myne was in fact the

daughter of an archnoble who had been sent to the temple and disguised as a commoner for her own protection. Her true name was “Rozemyne.”

Despite having seen her commoner family several times before, my first reaction was not surprise, but rather understanding. The temple was ruled by the oppressive whims of the blue priests; there was no point in arguing with their unreasonable expectations and demands. The decisions they made became the proper way of the world.

Regardless of what they thought on the inside, the attendants of Sister Myne, or rather Lady Rozemyne, all nodded in understanding. It was surely easier for them to understand serving an archnoble than a commoner.

“Rozemyne will be baptized in her father’s mansion this summer, and at the same time be adopted by the archduke. She will then assume the position of High Bishop,” the High Priest said, which made many of Sister Myne’s... er, many of *Lady Rozemyne’s* attendants blink in surprise. It was clear from their expressions that they had heard what he said, but could not understand it. I felt the same way.

It was not particularly rare for nobles to hide or be forced to send their pre-baptism children to the temple, where adult blue priests would serve as their guardians. Since nobles announced their children at their baptism ceremony, it was normal to send children who would never be announced to the temple before it happened. The idea that an archnoble’s daughter had been hidden and raised in the temple with the High Priest as her guardian made perfect sense and was readily agreeable. That said, it was a bit much to say that Lady Rozemyne would be replacing the High Bishop.

“The High Bishop has earned the ire of the archduke through multiple criminal acts, and is already imprisoned as we speak. I will assume the duties of High Bishop until Rozemyne is formally adopted by the archduke and can assume the position herself.”

He said he would assume the duties of High Bishop, but since he was already doing over half of his work, that wouldn’t increase his workload much at all. In fact, the lack of complaints and tedious instruction would likely mean a decreased workload overall.

“Rozemyne will be educated and trained in her father’s mansion until her baptism ceremony. There will be an inauguration ceremony for her afterward, which all of you will need to prepare for as her attendants. The High Bishop’s room will also need to be prepared for her. These chambers will be used as a meeting place when residents from the lower city such as those from the Gilberta Company are summoned.”

Out of all of the baffled attendants, Fran was the first to recover. “What is needed for the High Bishop inauguration ceremony?”

“Your job is simply to prepare the High Bishop’s room for Rozemyne’s use. I will prepare the clothes myself.”

Fran nodded, took out his diptych, and began writing something. Meanwhile, the High Priest turned to Lady Rozemyne.

“Rozemyne, I have already discussed this with Benno, but we will need to look into other orphanages that we can use to spread your printing business to other cities. Those sent need to understand the inner workings of your orphanage workshop. Who would you choose for this job?”

Lady Rozemyne looked around at her attendants, and a smile touched her lips as her gaze fell upon Gil, whose eyes were shining in anticipation. “I think I might ask Gil to handle this. He is more deeply involved with the workshop than anyone else, and has spent the most time with the Gilberta Company.”

That surprised me. It was truly hard for me to believe that she trusted Gil enough to do work outside of the city. I had been sure that she would send Fran, but perhaps he wasn’t needed here as much as I thought.

“Fran, you have to train Nicola and Monika on top of preparing the room for me, don’t you? I know this will be putting an extra burden on you, but without Gil here, I will need you to keep the workshop running as well.”

“As you wish.”

Oh. He was instead being crushed under the burden of all of the remaining work. That pleased me, but the small smile on his face was infuriating. He was serving a blue shrine maiden, just like he had been when he served Sister Margaret as an apprentice attendant, and yet he seemed much happier

following Lady Rozemyne's orders. It was a stark contrast to the Fran who would bite his lip and frown tearfully whenever Sister Margaret gave him orders. It made no sense to me.

"...If Gil will need to travel outside the city to help establish workshops, should I select a gray priest to manage the orphanage's workshop in his place?" Lady Rozemyne asked.

"That is not something you need to decide right away. It is more important that we get a musician for the baptism, as there will be many tea parties and feasts in your future. I was thinking you could buy Rosina as your personal musician. What do you say to that?"

"Sister Myne— Erm, Lady Rozemyne. Please, oh please buy me." Rosina's face beamed with excitement. It was exceptionally rare for shrine maidens to be purchased as anything but servants, with music teachers being no exception to that. It seemed the High Priest truly did respect her talents as a musician.

"That seems fine to me. I would love to have Rosina as my musician, especially as it will be nice to have someone I know by my side. But I would like for her to continue helping Fran until I move to the Noble's Quarter."

"I thank you ever so much," Rosina said. Her leaving Lady Rozemyne's attendants would greatly increase the burden on Fran, especially since she had just come of age and become used to her work. It was clear that Fran wanted to congratulate her but could not, and his conflicted expression brought a smile to my face.

"Moving on—here. Benno sent these for you."

Lady Rozemyne scanned the documents given to her, then put a hand on her cheek. "I was planning on taking Ella with me to the Noble's Quarter to make sweets for me, and Hugo and Todd will be sent to Leise's place to learn more noble recipes for the Italian restaurant. I wonder whether I can leave the cooking here to Nicola and Monika."

"They may not be skilled enough to serve you yet, Lady Rozemyne, but they should be fine as long as their food is edible for us attendants," Fran replied. It seemed that her attendants were forced to cook as well. Just how low on manpower were they?

I blinked in surprise, but the High Priest just shook his head in exasperation. “Rozemyne, that is nothing to worry about. You can just take on more attendants as needed.”

“High Priest, this is the best I can do with my income.”

“Think, fool. You now have an archnoble as your father, and will soon become the High Bishop with the archduke as your adoptive father. Up until now you have had to earn all of your money yourself, but it should be obvious that this will no longer be the case,” the High Priest said, the exasperation in his tone now much clearer.

Lady Rozemyne was attempting to settle things using exclusively her own money despite becoming both the daughter of an archnoble and the High Bishop. It seemed she was having difficulty adjusting her mindset to her new circumstances.

In any case. Lady Rozemyne becoming the High Bishop meant that Fran would become the head attendant of the High Bishop, which in turn would make him of a higher status than me. That was not entirely pleasing. It reminded me of how Sister Margaret had given him more affection than she had given me, and valued him more as an attendant.

...Allow me to correct myself: it was *extremely* displeasing. In fact, it was so frustrating that I would not be content simply bullying and tormenting him in subtle ways so that the High Priest would not notice.

The High Priest had entered the temple after the death of Sister Margaret, so he did not know that the mere sight of a blue shrine maiden had made Fran feel sick for some time, nor that he had traumatic memories in the orphanage director’s chambers. That was exactly why I had recommended Lady Rozemyne stay in these chambers, and why I suggested Gil serve alongside him.

It had been more than entertaining to see Fran’s displeased, pained, and miserable expressions during the trombe extermination mission and the Dedication Ritual, and while Lady Rozemyne was suffering as a result of my malice, that was a sacrifice I was willing to make. And yet, Fran was now serving Lady Rozemyne entirely as though he had conquered his past. The sight of him calmly spending time in this room was a clear sign of how much he had grown,

and while that frustrated me to no end, I hid my irritation beneath an expressionless mask.

The High Priest took out a magic tool—a ring with a large blue feystone embedded into it. “Rozemyne, have this. It is a gift from your father.”

Rozemyne took the ring from the High Priest’s hand and placed it on her finger. The feystone was large enough that it looked odd on her small hand.

“Use it to register your mana with this door. Follow me.”

The High Priest pulled aside the canopy of the bed to reveal another door, just like the one in his room. The very sight was nostalgic, frustrating, and sent waves of emotions through my heart. I quelled them and looked toward Fran.

As expected, his face had paled, and he was looking at the door with fearful eyes. Despite how calm he had been acting before, it seemed he had not entirely conquered his past. I could feel a dark joy spreading through my chest.

“What’s wrong, Fran? You look unwell,” Lady Rozemyne said, giving Fran a concerned look.

“It is nothing. Pay me no mind.”

“Surely it’s something. You look as though you’ve seen a ghost.”

Fran’s expression twisted into a troubled frown as everyone looked at him worriedly. That was to be expected; he certainly didn’t want anyone to know about his past, where Sister Margaret had called for and taken him into that room practically every night.

“High Priest,” I interjected, “I will spare everyone the details, but Fran does not have good memories in that room.”

“It will be fine, Fran. The room is created by magic, and will not be the same one you are familiar with,” the High Priest said casually, unaware of Fran’s circumstances. He then shifted his focus to registering Lady Rozemyne’s mana with the door.

Considering that just seeing the door was enough to drain the blood from his face, Fran would surely feel an enormous amount of stress regardless of what was inside. But nobody seemed to notice that—all thanks to Fran working as

hard as he could to appear calm on the surface, no doubt.

“And that concludes the registration. You may use that room when you wish to discuss matters you want no one to hear, even your attendants, as voices out here can be heard elsewhere even if you clear this room.”

“Can anyone go inside?”

“Unlike my workshop, there are no special restrictions in place.”

It was likely that she would be using the room daily from now on. The sight of Fran enduring his stress and fear alone, unable to say a word of complaint, made me very pleased.

“Are you okay, Fran?” I asked.

“...Thank you for helping me there, Arno.”

“I will have to explain your situation to the High Priest if he asks. My apologies, Fran, but my hands are tied.”

...I intend to tell him everything regardless of whether he asks. How does it feel to know that the High Priest you respect so much will know the secrets of your past that you want to keep hidden more than anything else? I offered a small smile, hiding the poison beneath it, and Fran gave a defeated nod.

“I imagine that the High Priest will ask for details, but nothing can be done about that. I will just have to be thankful that Sister Myne, or rather Lady Rozemyne, has not heard about it.”

...Oh, so you are more concerned about Lady Rozemyne finding out than the High Priest? Aah, I wonder when and where I shall inform her, then...

Fran had received the affections of Sister Margaret that I desired so much, and yet rejected her.

Fran just watched as Sister Margaret fell into despair, having become unable to return to noble society due to sleeping with a gray priest. He did nothing to stop her from killing herself.

Fran thanked the gods in utter relief when Sister Margaret died.

I have not forgiven you, Fran.

Benno—Maybe Lessen the Workload

Friggin' everybody and their mother is dumping work on me! Do they want me to die or something?!

The day after I heard that Myne had become Rozemyne, the High Priest summoned me to the temple. I'd figured he would since I knew so much about Myne's circumstances, but the day after the incident? I never saw that coming. That was way too fast for a noble. It always took them days and days to set up meetings.

The store got busier after second bell thanks to the gates opening, and it was then that Gil came rushing in carrying a letter of invitation. It was the first time I had ever gotten one from a noble with no dates or anything written on it—all it said was to come as soon as possible.

"Take care of the store while I'm gone, everyone!"

Mark and I hurriedly got changed before heading to the temple at once. This was going to be an extremely important meeting that determined the Gilberta Company's future. We knew that if the High Priest determined we weren't necessary for Rozemyne, the daughter of an archnoble, he could have us eliminated at any given moment. It was time to fight for our survival.

"I appreciate you coming on such short notice, Benno. Arno, clear the room." The discussion was secretive enough that the High Priest cleared the room even of his attendants.

"Do you know why you're here?"

"...To discuss Lady Rozemyne, I would think."

"Word travels fast, I see. Who knows?"

There was no point in lying, so I decided to just tell the truth. Besides, the High Priest was the closest person to Rozemyne in the temple, and I didn't want him distrusting me.

“Everyone who was there with me in the store when Myne’s family visited us—Mark, Lutz, and another leherl of mine, Leon. That should be everyone.” I informed him that Lutz and Otto had taken refuge in my home after the fight in the streets, and that Myne’s family had stopped by to get Lutz.

“That reminds me—Damuel did mention that Lutz had gotten wrapped up in this...” the High Priest murmured. He then began telling me about Rozemyne. She was the daughter of an archnoble who had been entrusted to the temple, and she had created the Rozemyne Workshop in order to save the orphanage. Her achievements were so great that the archduke elected to adopt her, and once she was baptized, she would take up the position of High Bishop.

“We can make the fact that she established a workshop before her baptism look less suspicious by embellishing her giving work and food to orphans. Benno, inform those who know of Myne and her workshop in as convincing of a manner as possible. Remember well that you can be purged at any time if deemed necessary.”

“Understood.” Gunther had told me the same thing, but the words carried a lot more weight when it was a noble like the High Priest saying it right to my face.

“I know that I am asking a lot of you, but the archduke is unfamiliar with lower city matters, and I do not wish for him to grow tired and simply begin to eliminate everyone who knew Rozemyne as a commoner one by one. That can still happen if we are not careful.”

I swallowed hard. It was simple for nobles to eliminate commoners who were inconveniencing them. The archduke protected his duchy, and there was absolutely no doubt in my mind that he’d pick a money-making revolutionary like Rozemyne over us. Controlling the spread of information about Myne and Rozemyne immediately shot up to be my absolute highest priority.

“Furthermore, have this. It is from the archduke.”

The High Priest handed me a directive from the archduke. It contained all the flowery prose of a noble, but among all that there were two broad instructions. The first was pretty much, “Hey pal, remember that plan for the printing business we discussed? Get going,” and second was, “I’m gonna come check out

that eatery of yours once the Starbind Ceremony is over. Better finish up soon.”

...Can you imagine how terrified I was when the blue priest coming to tour the workshop turned out to be the archduke? At the time, I was more shocked than anything else, but now the thought just hurt my head. I was sure I had two years of leeway before the printing business took off, but now I had none. I could feel my head spinning, but now wasn't the time to be reeling in shock; my life depended on carrying out these unreasonable orders.

“He said that he would be sending a merchant and a scholar-official to a nearby town's orphanage. You will need to attend a meeting to discuss this ahead of time.”

“When will that be?”

A meeting with a scholar—in other words, a noble—wasn't something I could trust to anyone else. I would need to keep my schedule absolutely open, and assuming that Mark would be coming with me, I needed to make sure the store was prepared to operate without us.

“I would imagine not immediately, since he will have to discuss matters with the scholar first.”

“May I ask that someone from the temple's orphanage accompany us? Someone familiar with the orphanage both before and after the workshop was established would be ideal, if possible.” Nothing would get done if I was alone with the scholar; he would just view a merchant like me with contempt and suspicion, so having someone who both understood the temple orphanage and was close to Rozemyne, the future High Bishop and adopted daughter of the archduke, would make a big difference. I'd borrow as much authority as I could if doing so would keep myself and others protected.

“A fair suggestion. I will ask Rozemyne to send one of her attendants along with you.”

“It is much appreciated. And if I may, I would like to ask whether the archduke is, ahem, *serious* about this second matter.” Nobody would believe me if I said that the archduke was visiting a lower city eatery, not even if I showed them the directive.

The High Priest glared at the directive with a bitter frown, then gave a slow nod. “He said he would like to discuss your findings over a meal. His reasoning is that you would not be able to speak your mind in the audience chamber.”

...Hold on a second. So this isn't just him dropping by for a meal—he's telling me to give a full report on the other town's orphanage and the printing business? Without holding anything back? No way.

“Erm, would I be right to think that this is him telling me to go on this inspection, compile my findings, and then report it to him at the Italian restaurant?”

“You would indeed.”

“And this is happening right after the Star Festival...?”

“...That would be correct.”

I swallowed the urge to shout “That's impossible” and instead just rubbed my temples to ease my growing headache. The High Priest gave me the most sincere look of sympathy I had ever seen.

“You have no choice but to consider this a test of your abilities and endure,” he said, offering me barbed words of encouragement in a tone that sharply contrasted his usual restrained noble-esque demeanor.

I widened my eyes in surprise. He was actually letting his emotions show. As I took a closer look, I could see the unmistakable signs of exhaustion on his face. Given how he had summoned me first thing in the morning after the events of yesterday, I could safely guess that he had spent all night cleaning up the mess.

In an instant, I understood that he was always being dragged around by the rampaging archduke. He probably had an even rougher time with things than I did, considering he was close to both him and Rozemyne. Somehow, knowing that there was someone out there suffering even more than me was a huge relief.

“May I ask how many nobles there will be in total? The archduke himself visiting an eatery in the lower city is unprecedented, which will make it a bit hard to prepare for.”

“Of course there is no damned precedence,” he replied, clear irritation on his face. Our eyes met, so I went ahead and gave a casual shrug as if to say “We both have it rough, huh?” Thankfully, it seemed he understood my intent; his expression softened just a little, and a sardonic smile crept onto his face.

“You will be stuck dealing with the archduke for as long as you continue associating with Rozemyne. I have my hands full with the temple and the Noble’s Quarter, so I shall entrust the lower city—and all of the suffering that comes with it—to you.”

“I would like to refuse from the bottom of my heart, but I don’t believe that’s an option.”

“If refusing was an option, I would be doing so myself.”

We exchanged a small laugh, and then the High Priest’s expression stiffened once more. “As for how many nobles will be visiting the eatery,” he continued, “there will be the archduke, the commander of the Knight’s Order to guard him, Rozemyne as the central figure in printing, and myself. There will be several other knights there as guards, but they will not be eating at the table with us. That said, they will be taking turns eating elsewhere, so a secondary eating area will need to be prepared.”

Even just a laynoble visiting a lower city eatery would cause a huge stir, but the archduke himself was coming this time. We wouldn’t even have the leeway to exploit this for marketing purposes. Our best option would be to hide it as much as possible to avoid any trouble; it was impossible to predict what would happen with the archduke, the commander of the Knight’s Order, the High Bishop, and the High Priest all in one place.

I grimaced while writing down the High Priest’s advice. This was going to be far too much work; neither printing nor the Italian restaurant were the Gilberta Company’s main business, so there weren’t many people I could put on them for help. That said, I couldn’t slack on the printing business now that I had a direct order from the archduke. I needed to get the work done no matter what, and had to think about how to lessen the blowback against the Gilberta Company growing so rapidly. There was no end to what I had to do.

First of all, I needed to find a way to stop the guildmaster from whining and

getting in my way every time I needed a form approved for something. He would settle down on the surface if I said I was working for the archduke, but he would no doubt work against me in more subtle ways to compensate. I needed some kind of bait.

“...If so many nobles will be joining the archduke, I would like to have my chefs train elsewhere. They are currently training in Lady Rozemyne’s chambers, but would it be a problem for me to send them elsewhere?”

“I intend to educate Rozemyne in the Noble’s Quarter prior to her baptism. I imagine it will be fine once she has left, but I will check to be sure.”

“Could you deliver these to her, then?” I wrote down on some sheets of plant paper that I would be asking the guildmaster to become a partner in the Italian restaurant. I would use the restaurant as bait to get his help in the future, thereby lessening my workload and the blowback I would be facing. Meanwhile, I would send Hugo and Todd to train at the guildmaster’s home, where they would learn more noble recipes.

While I was writing the letter, the High Priest took a bundle off of a shelf and brought it to the table. “Rozemyne’s inauguration as High Bishop will begin as soon as her baptism ceremony is over. The plan is to hold it right before the Starbind Ceremony, and I ask that you alter these to her measurements.” He spread it out in front of me, and I immediately recognized it as the High Bishop’s ceremonial robes. Rozemyne’s archnoble father would be preparing her baptism clothes, but the temple had to prepare her High Bishop outfit, and they simply lacked the seamstresses to do it.

“You have Rozemyne’s measurements already, no? Don’t worry about the sash; she can use the one she has already. I have heard about those special sewing techniques she likes to request. I trust you to know what she wants. Furthermore, I will be ordering a ceremonial hair stick. Use the highest quality thread to adorn it with fanciful flowers.”

“...Understood.” To summarize, I had just been told to control the flow of information concerning Rozemyne, kickstart the printing industry, finish the Italian restaurant, *and* do my actual job of making clothes and accessories.

...I’m gonna die. At this rate, I’m actually going to be crushed under my

workload and die.

When I returned to my store with the burden of overwhelming work already weighing me down, Leon was there to tell me that the guildmaster had summoned me. I listened to his report while changing out of my noble outfit.

“It seems he wants to discuss Lady Rozemyne. Just where did he hear about that?” Leon wondered aloud.

I had heard about it directly from Myne’s family, so I faced some potential problems unless I figured out the guildmaster’s source. I clicked my tongue and sent a return message saying that I could meet him that afternoon, which meant I had to rush and finish my highest priority business before the messenger got back from the Merchant’s Guild.

“Mark, send someone to the smithy and get them to keep on making metal letter types. Get Bierce’s ink workshop to make more printing ink, too. Tell them that we’re gonna spread printing throughout the duchy, at the archduke’s orders.”

Regardless of how the orphanage inspection went, nothing would change the fact that the printing business would be expanding into an industry. The sooner I got things ready, the better.

Mark, having finished changing, nodded and let out a lengthy sigh. “Now that it has come to this, we will have to get the guildmaster involved as soon as possible. We will never be able to keep up if each form takes days upon days to be approved.”

“That’s what I’m gonna talk to him about today. The geezer’s a pain in the ass to deal with, but thanks to his nose for money, he’s not impossible to work with.” I left it at that and finished changing, then grabbed the robes the High Priest had given me and ran up the stairs to Corinna’s place.

“Corinna! We’ve got an urgent job. Alter these robes so they’ll fit Myne.” I spread out the white ceremonial robes, and Corinna widened her eyes in shock.

“But Benno, aren’t those the High Bishop’s robes?”

“I’m asking for Myne’s measurements here, but it’s gonna be the daughter of an archnoble wearing them—Lady Rozemyne, not Myne. Take care not to mix

'em up."

Corinna lowered her eyes, then gave a deliberate nod. She had probably heard some details from Otto, but she was a merchant who dealt with nobles just like I did. She knew well that, at times, you just had to accept the unreasonable and do your job.

"I understand."

"Also, they ordered a fancy hair stick to use at her baptism ceremony. That means it should be themed around the color white. Use blue for the season, and some gold for her eyes, too. But, y'know... this is an important job. I think we should get some real experienced craftsmen to do it," I said, indirectly implying that we should get Myne's family to make it.

"I agree," Corinna said with a small giggle. She had heard me loud and clear.

With Corinna clear on what work she had to do, I climbed back down the stairs right as my messenger returned from the Merchant's Guild.

"Alright, I'm heading to the Guild. Mark, get everything ready."

"It already is."

I arrived at the Merchant's Guild and was immediately let into the guildmaster's office. I found him waiting inside with his granddaughter, Freida. Judging by how he wasn't acting pompous like usual, he was probably as worked up about this as I was.

"Benno, you know about Rozemyne, don't you?"

"I'll be blunt: everything to do with Rozemyne is being kept extremely secret. Where's the leak? How'd you find out? Depending on your answers, the nobles could kill us all."

"...So you do know, then." Freida smiled. "The noble I signed with has a younger brother who is assigned to guard an apprentice blue shrine maiden, you see."

Freida began discussing her own circumstances and what had happened when she had gone to get her magic tool emptied. The knight had been brought to her room unconscious, some light had burst into the room out of nowhere

and dusted over him, after which he shouted about an apprentice shrine maiden being in danger and rushed to go help her. Given that Myne was the only apprentice blue shrine maiden, Freida checked her magic contracts to check whether she was alive, and there she found that her name had been changed to “Rozemyne.”

That knight she mentioned must have been the bodyguard who had been following Myne around everywhere since winter. I never would have thought that he was connected to Freida and the guildmaster.

“Now then, Benno—tell us everything you know,” the guildmaster said. For a second, I considered whether I should keep the rest to myself, but the geezer and his granddaughter already knew Myne pretty well. The coming days would probably be easier for me if I just went ahead and told them the situation now—that way, they’d be stuck dealing with Rozemyne and the archduke just like I was.

“Sure. But if I do, I’m gonna need you to be fully cooperative from now on.”

“Oh? You, instructing me?” The guildmaster raised an amused eyebrow, acting unfazed, but I saw a faint glimmer of worry in his eyes. No matter how rich he was and how much influence he had in the lower city, a noble could easily snap their fingers and have him dead by noon. Almost everything he and his granddaughter knew about Rozemyne was speculation, and unless they got firm details soon, they had no way to avoid potentially stepping on noble toes. I knew they wanted information more than anything else.

“Yep. I’ll be on top here whether you like it or not.”

“...Are you telling me to hand over my seat as guildmaster?”

“Don’t be stupid! Does it look like I want to deal with guildmaster duties on top of everything else?! No! I just want you to stop being a pain in my ass and show some cooperation!” I didn’t have the time to deal with this city’s guildmaster duties while working on spreading an industry through an entire duchy. That would actually kill me.

We glared at each other for a moment, and then the guildmaster nodded. “Show cooperation, hm? It seems a noble of fairly high status is involved here... Very well.”

I told him and Freida the cover story about Myne dying. She was now the daughter of an archnoble, soon to be adopted by the archduke, and we would be spreading book-making throughout the duchy as government business under the archduke.

“...I am absolutely terrified,” he replied.

“I must admit, I did not expect her to have been adopted by the archduke,” Freida agreed.

Rozemyne was now the daughter of an archnoble, soon to be adopted by the archduke; she was not someone they could treat lightly. The guildmaster, with all his noble associates, knew that well.

“With printing being a duchy-wide industry, I’ll need the full cooperation of the Merchant’s Guild. You know how dangerous it is to complain about an industry that has the archduke’s backing, yeah?”

“Hrmm...” The guildmaster fell into thought, clearly trying to work out how much he could profit from this. I tossed him some bait.

“Mind if I send my chefs to train at your place? I want them to learn more about noble cooking before the archduke and archnobles visit the eatery.” Given that actual nobles were visiting the store, it would be wise to teach them not just Myne’s recipes, but normal noble recipes as well. I also wanted to lessen the potential blowback on us by getting the guildmaster involved.

“...What is in it for me?”

“I let you invest in our Italian restaurant and become a partner. How’s that sound?”

I had started the restaurant after the guildmaster’s chef taunted me, but considering that I needed to handle spreading the printing industry throughout the duchy, I didn’t have the time to expand my horizons into eateries. On top of that, the only one who had chefs that could cook noble food, and who knew nobles well enough to run the Italian restaurant, was the guildmaster. And I had no doubt that his home was full of servants trained to serve food.

“...Very well. How much funding do you need, I wonder?” Freida replied, her eyes gleaming as she jumped at the offer before even the guildmaster could.

Fran—To Serve as the High Bishop's Attendant

"Excuse me, Sister My— Lady Rozemyne. When third bell rings, I will be leaving with Gil to clean the High Bishop's room."

"Fran, are you feeling better already? You're not in pain at all?" Lady Rozemyne asked, her face a little red from fever as she rested upon her bed in the orphanage director's chambers. She was inquiring once again about the wounds I had received when fighting the Devouring soldiers that the High Bishop and Count Bindewald had brought into the temple, and I couldn't help but smile at her continued concern.

"As I have said, my wounds were completely healed by a suddenly appearing light that rained dust down upon me. Please worry about yourself rather than me. You now have to live as the daughter of an archnoble, Lady Rozemyne, and that is much more concerning."

There was a magic ring with a heavy-looking blue stone on the middle finger of Lady Rozemyne's left hand—a symbol of her current status. She saw me glance at it and forced a small smile.

"It hurts a little every time someone calls me Rozemyne, like I'm being reminded that I'm no longer Myne. I hope I can get used to it soon... Before I go to the Noble's Quarter, at least."

It seemed that we weren't the only ones having trouble adjusting to her new name. I had been told just enough to understand that Lady Rozemyne was the daughter of an archnoble, and would soon be adopted by the archduke.

"Fran, you faced off against Count Bindewald and were there when Lord Sylvester appeared—you can guess what I'm feeling without me even needing to say it, can't you? Please keep this a secret from the High Priest," she said, before murmuring weakly about how worried she was for her commoner family and how she doubted she would ever be able to become a proper noble.

...The High Priest had told me to always report when Lady Rozemyne became

sad or uneasy, since unstable emotions could lead to her losing control of her mana. What would be the best course of action here? While struggling to decide whether I should keep her feelings a secret, I took out a book I had borrowed from the book room and offered it to her.

“As your fever appears to have mostly gone down, you may read as long as you stay in bed. Will that help cheer you up?”

“Thanks, Fran!”

As Lady Rozemyne gleefully hugged the thick book to her chest, I gave her some space and began looking around the room. I could see Rosina smiling brightly as she polished the large harspiel.

“Rosina, I must go and clean up the High Bishop’s room with Gil. Please take care of Lady Rozemyne while I am gone. She will no doubt be absorbed in her book, so you will need to observe the time and tell her to drink water when necessary.”

“Understood,” Rosina replied, her eyes not leaving the harspiel for a second. I could understand that she was overjoyed to rise from a gray shrine maiden to a noble’s personal musician, but she still had much to do, including teaching Monika and Nicola; I could not trust two newly taken on apprentice attendants with taking care of Lady Rozemyne.

“Rosina, please take care to do your job. If Monika and Nicola are not trained to take your place, it will be longer before I can inform the High Priest that you are ready to leave for the Noble’s Quarter.”

As Lady Rozemyne was a woman, there were many duties that only gray shrine maidens could perform—for one, it was their job to wash her and then change her clothes. In the past, I had assumed I could teach them since I had learned to do both while serving the High Priest, but was forced to change my attitude upon seeing Rosina teach Delia. The work was the same, but there were many different expectations between the genders.

“I am to some degree capable of teaching them how to change her clothes, store her clothes, help her bathe, and assist her in preparing for rituals, but doing her hair, selecting ornaments, and other such forms of upkeep are beyond me. You must teach them both what you know so that Lady Rozemyne

will not suffer when staying here in the temple as High Bishop. Remember that while you may have finished teaching Delia, she is no longer here.”

Rosina blinked in surprise, then let go of the harspiel and went off to fetch Monika and Nicola; that warning would likely be enough for her to teach them properly. I myself went to get Gil, who was busy cleaning on the first floor, and together we exited the director’s chambers to meet the High Priest.

“Ah, there you both are. Let us head to the High Bishop’s room. Zahm, inform Fran of our current situation.”

Zahm, one of the High Priest’s attendants, brought me up to speed as we walked. It seemed that the blue priests had still not been told the details of the incident—all they knew was that the High Bishop had passed away, and those who had deep connections to him were trembling in fear over whatever had brought him down.

“Fran, Gil—put away the altar. We will handle the paperwork.”

“Understood.”

The High Bishop’s personal belongings had to be removed so that his room could be prepared for Lady Rozemyne. Inside, the High Priest’s attendants were busily moving around, though I found it strange that I couldn’t see Arno among them. Gil and I began using cloth to delicately wrap up the bible, the candles on the altar, and so on before moving them to a wooden box for storage. I also measured various pieces of furniture, writing my findings on a diptych to use as a basis when ordering new furniture for Lady Rozemyne.

“Man, I bet when she’s the High Bishop, Myne’s— Er, I mean, Lady Rozemyne’s gonna be pumped. Er, going to be pumped,” Gil said, trying to speak properly now that there were people around. I gently corrected him, noting that “pumped” should be “very pleased” instead, but I too could rest a little easier knowing that Lady Rozemyne would be able to find solace in having new books to read as everything else about her life changed.

“Is that all of the paperwork? There’s not as much here as I expected,” the High Priest observed.

“We found several wooden boards on one of the shelves,” one of his

attendants responded.

Since the High Priest would be taking on almost all of the High Bishop's duties, he and his attendants were prioritizing the paperwork over everything else. But since the High Priest had already taken so much work from the High Bishop to circumvent his laziness and incompetence when it came to doing his job, there wasn't actually much paperwork there.

"I will now take these to the orphanage director's chambers to organize," I said, gesturing toward a number of wooden boxes filled with paperwork and equipment. Gil and I picked up the first one, but as we went to leave, the High Priest called out to me.

"Fran, come to my chambers after noon. We must discuss transferring the High Bishop's furniture, as well as the High Bishop duties that Rozemyne will need to perform."

"Understood."

I returned to the director's chambers, where I compared my measurements with ones Rosina had taken earlier. As the daughter of the archduke, Lady Rozemyne's furniture would need to be fashionable, expensive, and of course, precisely measured.

Fourth bell rang. I took Lady Rozemyne's book away from her so that she would eat, and then went to the kitchen to eat whatever food was leftover, as was customary for us attendants. But it felt strange to be here without Delia, her former role having been taken by Monika and Nicola.

"How is your learning going?" I asked them. "Do you think you can manage as attendants?"

"Not everyone is lucky enough to be taken on as apprentice attendants. We don't have much time to learn, but we'll try our hardest," Monika said with a serious expression. Nicola nodded with a smile, adding that with food this good, she would work as hard as was necessary.

Her putting her stomach above everything else made me smile; with enthusiasm like that, they would both be masters of their jobs in no time. According to Rosina, they had been trained in the orphanage by Wilma ahead of

time, so their training here was progressing faster than anticipated.

After our meal, I took the divine gifts to the orphanage. Once Wilma and Fritz had hurried over to get the gifts, I looked around. Everything seemed to be running as normal.

“How are things, Wilma?”

“Well... I am a little worried about Delia. She is looking after Dirk all by herself, accepting help from no one. I feel that it won't be long before she collapses...”

I lowered my eyes a bit upon hearing Delia's name. To speak frankly, she was not someone I was fond of. Both her using her womanhood as a weapon to get the High Bishop to accept her, and prioritizing the orphan Dirk over her own master did not sit well with me. I personally did not care what happened to Delia now that she had betrayed her master for the High Bishop, but Lady Rozemyne would still worry if something happened to her or Dirk—she had pleaded with the archduke himself to spare their lives, after all.

“I do not believe there is much we can do but let Delia continue on until she collapses. She is in such torment right now that she would likely not listen to anything we have to say to her. Our best course of action is to prepare someone to look after Dirk and someone to look after Delia once she collapses.”

“...I see. Very well then.” Wilma sent a worried glance toward the back of the dining hall, then nodded.

Upon returning to the director's chambers, I found Gil anxiously waiting for me. “You've gotta go to the High Priest's room, right? I'll go check up on the workshop. We're gonna be going to the forest tomorrow,” he said, so worried that his speech was falling apart. I gave him a warning, and he corrected himself after sucking in some air.

“I shall check up on the workshop.”

“Gil, I feel as though there are times where you overload yourself with work that only you can do, to secure your place among Lady Rozemyne's attendants. However, if you are to be the High Bishop's apprentice attendant, you must learn to delegate your work to other gray priests. Lady Rozemyne is not the type of person who would cut you off while you work so hard to serve her.”

Gil frowned and raced off to the workshop, while Rosina resumed instructing Monika and Nicola. I gave Lady Rozemyne another book so that she would not leave her bed, then went to the High Priest's room. Once inside, I found the High Priest busily sorting through boards and paperwork. They had likely all been taken from the High Bishop's chambers.

"I appreciate you coming, Fran. How is the girl doing? I heard her fever was lasting longer than usual."

"It's almost entirely gone now. However, I believe she is still emotionally unstable. She spoke of worrying about her family and feeling anxious about her current position," I reported, and the High Priest's expression softened a bit with relief.

"We do not need to worry if she is comfortable enough to share her anxieties with you. The potion I gave her this time does not restore much mana, and given how much she spent, her mana should be fine for quite some time. Though do tell me if you notice any changes."

The High Priest's attendants and I discussed what to do with the furniture taken out of the former High Bishop's chambers. His family did not care to have it, so it would instead be distributed among the blue priests. Once we had finished arranging the order in which we would put this furniture on display and who would look after it, the High Priest waved a hand.

"I will now discuss a ritual that Rozemyne shall perform as High Bishop. Return to your work," he said, and his attendants all immediately distanced themselves from his desk, leaving only myself and the High Priest there. I took out my diptych once they were all gone to write down what he had to say, at which point he glanced at me, then lowered his voice and seemingly forced his next words out. "Fran, I heard about your circumstances from Arno."

Goosebumps rose on my skin, and I swallowed hard. Arno had said that he would inform the High Priest about my past if asked, but now that it had actually happened, I felt as though I wasn't even fit to stand in the High Priest's presence. I instinctively took a step backward.

"Although I did not know at the time, I can imagine the pain you felt when I ordered you to serve a blue shrine maiden. Fran, do you wish to continue

serving Rozemyne? Can you view her as your master, as you did me in the past?” he asked, fixing his golden eyes on me, speaking not a word of my past. It felt as though he had indirectly said that the past did not matter, and I could feel the burden on my heart lighten.

“You are correct in assuming that I was depressed at first. Nothing could have been worse for me than returning to the orphanage director’s chambers in service of a blue shrine maiden.”

Lady Rozemyne had been given the chambers with the furniture and cutlery unchanged from its last owner, which forced me to remember my past there. But I was shocked to see just how big of a difference a new master could make.

Lady Rozemyne took gray priests to the lower city when normally they weren’t permitted to leave the temple, and she taught those in the orphanage and the workshop the ways of commoners. I could see my environment changing before my very eyes. She started one new thing after another, and I was so caught up following Lady Rozemyne as she changed the temple using her outsider influence that I didn’t have the time to think about my past.

“Lady Rozemyne is nothing like Sister Margaret. She does not use the orphanage for her own benefit. Instead, she fights to improve it as much as she can.”

She could have treated the orphans like tools to exploit. She could have embezzled the orphanage’s budget to line her own pockets. She could have done no meaningful work beyond accepting the payment those who directed the orphanage were given. But she didn’t, and that was what made Lady Rozemyne entirely different from every orphanage director who had come before her. Instead, she used her own funds to save the orphans, giving them work and the means to survive on their own. Only someone raised in the orphanage could truly understand just how wonderful and important Lady Rozemyne’s impact had been, doubly so considering that she had needed to do it all under the noses of the High Bishop and the blue priests.

“All those in the orphanage, from the youngest child to the oldest gray priest, respect and thank her. She often baffles me, but even so, I would like to continue serving and being of use to Lady Rozemyne however I can.”

“I see. Good, then. I have distanced Arno since his own actions had been unduly influenced by his past experience with blue shrine maidens, but I hope that you continue to serve Rozemyne well.”

I exhaled, understanding the intent behind the High Priest’s short, coded message. I had thought it strange that Arno was not among the High Priest’s other attendants, but it seemed that he had climbed the towering stairway.

And given that his past with blue shrine maidens was mentioned, I can guess that Arno was also one of Sister Margaret’s victims.

“In noble society, even the smallest of errors can lead to permanent stains. Keep that firmly in mind as you serve Rozemyne. It is not enough to just diligently follow orders down to the letter; you must be firm in your guidance, such that she produces results befitting not just any noble, but the daughter of an archduke,” the High Priest said, telling me what we would need to do as attendants of Lady Rozemyne, and how we would need to prepare ourselves for serving the daughter of an archduke.

“Understood. I will serve her well and true.”

The High Priest gave a firm nod, then waved a hand. I knelt down, my arms crossed over my chest, and then left the High Priest’s room to return to the orphanage director’s chambers.

...He wanted results befitting the daughter of an archduke. Lady Rozemyne lacked the knowledge that all nobles shared, and was inexperienced as an apprentice shrine maiden. Supporting her such that she would produce results befitting a High Bishop adopted by the archduke would require much work, and the weight of such a responsibility sent a shiver down my spine.

Lady Rozemyne will first stand before the public as High Bishop during the Starbind Ceremony. Before anything else, I must ensure she does not fail there.

“Rosina, Monika, Nicola—your assistance, please.”

I called everyone over and had them begin summarizing all of the rituals on wooden boards so that it would be easier for Lady Rozemyne to memorize them later. Each year had a number of rituals, each requiring things to be memorized. She had to perform her High Bishop duties flawlessly, and we all

had to support her as best we could to ensure that under no circumstances would she fail.

Gil was deeply involved in what interested Lady Rozemyne most—book-making—and was proving quite useful in that regard. In which case, as Lady Rozemyne’s head attendant, I would need to focus on supporting her High Bishop duties as much as possible.

While watching the boards steadily pile up, I shifted my gaze to the bed where Lady Rozemyne was resting. *Now then, how shall I have Lady Rozemyne memorize all of these when she will most likely ask to go to the book room instead?*

“In order to teach her, it seems I will first have to learn a way to stop Lady Rozemyne from always charging straight toward books,” I muttered. Rosina heard and glanced toward the bed as well.

“That will likely prove quite difficult,” she said with a quiet giggle, and I couldn’t help but nod in agreement.

Effa—Facing the Future

I awoke in the middle of the night to the sound of Kamil crying. Rubbing the sleep from my eyes, I picked him up. It was time for him to be breastfed. His hair and eyes were a similar color to Myne's, so thoughts of her surfaced in my mind as I was giving milk.

Myne had always been so quick to get fevers or become bedridden that, for her entire life, I had feared that she might die—that each fever could potentially be the one that was too much for her. And then, when she had finally gotten healthy for the first time, she was taken far away from me, where I would never be able to reach her.

But... she hasn't actually died, I thought, trying to cheer myself up the same way I always did when I found myself getting sad. Myne was still alive, and even if she couldn't treat us like family anymore, we still had a thin connection to her. That was enough to make just a little bit of my sorrow go away.

I wonder if Gunther's okay. I looked at the large lump beneath the blankets beside me, twisting and turning as if unable to sleep. Before I knew it, I had let out a heavy sigh.

It was important to continue life as normal once the funeral had ended. Gunther had to go back to work, no matter how devastated he was, which was why he had gone to the gate yesterday. He had begrudgingly left for his day shift at third bell, but fourth bell hadn't even rang before he came trudging home.

Apparently, he had punched his boss—the gate commander—in the face, and while the others sympathized with his plight, they had told him to go home and cool it. The commander had allegedly said something to him about Myne. Nobody knew what exactly, but several people heard Gunther scream, "That outsider noble got in 'cause you didn't tell the guards what I told you! It's your fault I lost Myne!" before diving at the commander and going to town. That was what Otto, one of his subordinates and the person who had walked him home,

had told me.

Gunther lived for his children, and he cared for Myne more than anyone, especially through her sick health. He regretted beyond words that he hadn't been able to stop the noble from breaking into the city—that he hadn't been able to protect Myne, and in the end, had been protected by Myne himself. He was so depressed that it felt as though he was on the verge of throwing his whole life away.

...I think I should leave him be for a little while longer.

I patted Kamil's back lightly to help him burp, then checked his diaper. As I slowly drifted back to sleep, I hoped more than anything that Gunther would recover as soon as possible.

"I think it's because of Myne's blessings," Tuuli said out of nowhere the next morning while preparing for work. She was beaming a smile that said she was excited at her realization, but I had no idea what she was talking about.

"What do you mean?"

"Me getting a contract with Mrs. Corinna yesterday. I wasn't scared of going to the north part of the city at all since I was going there to keep my promise to Myne, and I wasn't scared of asking Mrs. Corinna to hire me. That's definitely thanks to Myne's blessings."

Yesterday, Tuuli had gone to the Gilberta Company with Lutz and managed to get an agreement to move to Corinna's workshop when it was time for her lehang contract to be renewed. It came completely out of the blue for Tuuli, who had previously been anxious about going to that part of the city whenever she had to.

I wonder if she'd get mad if I said that reminds me of Myne?

"I still can't believe it! Mrs. Corinna actually said she would trust me with making Myne's hairpins. I need to get better quick so nobody takes the work away from me," Tuuli said with a proud smile, before quietly adding, "It's all going so well thanks to Myne's blessings."

If you asked me, it had more to do with the Gilberta Company's plotting than

any blessings—they'd surely hired Tuuli so that they'd have another connection to Myne, now that she was the daughter of a noble and all. Still, Tuuli was just glad to have another thread connecting her to her little sister, who in her eyes wasn't dead yet. It was clear that she thought that if she worked hard, she could keep meeting Myne. She was facing the future and charging forward in a display of hope so pure it was dazzling.

"You got Myne's blessings too, right, Mom? You're moving a lot easier than you were before. But still, you shouldn't push yourself! You may not have birthing pains anymore, but you're still going to be exhausted from feeding Kamil at night."

I felt as though Tuuli was telling me that I needed to face the future too, especially since Myne's blessings had cured me of the helpless pain and exhaustion I had felt ever since giving birth. *I won't lose to my own daughter here*, I thought to myself, and as I put on my cooking apron, I found myself smiling for the first time since Myne had gone.

"I've been blessed by Myne, Tuuli—you don't need to worry about me. And listen, there's second bell. Have a nice day at work."

After cheering up a bit and seeing Tuuli off to her apprentice work, I washed some dishes using a jar of water while keeping an eye on Kamil. I glanced around the house and noticed that Tuuli had already washed the clothes for me, but I would still need to draw more water. The market would also be opening later on today, so I would need to go shopping for food as well. We had already finished all of the food donated to us by our neighbors. It was tempting for me to just be satisfied with some leftovers for lunch, but with Gunther around, I needed to make something more sizable.

...Now, where should I start cleaning up? I thought just as Gunther trudged out of bed. He was up much later than usual, and it wasn't as though he was working a night shift or anything. He stared at me through kind of narrowed eyes as I moved around the house, working in my apron.

"How come you and Tuuli can just keep on acting normal? Myne's gone, y'know."

"The funeral is over, and our neighbors have helped us enough. If Tuuli and I

spent all of our time crying instead of working, who would give milk to Kamil, or make our food, or wash our clothes?”

No matter how sad we were or how great the loss was, it was already time for us to get back to work if we wanted to live—Gunther should have known that as well.

“Not to mention that we’re not like most families. Myne gave us a lot of blessings. She gave us the power to strive toward our goals, to deflect malice, to heal our pain, and to endure trials and tribulations—she gave it to all her loved ones. So, I’m fine.”

Gunther suddenly raised his head in realization. I smiled at him.

“Tuuli is striving to keep her promise to Myne and make the most of her blessings, but you’re just lazing around all day, not enduring this trial at all. I wonder if that means she doesn’t love you? Did you actually get blessed?” I asked, already knowing the answer.

Gunther’s eyes shot open. “Of course she does! We had all those final goodbyes, and the burns on my arm healed! Myne loves me for sure!” Seeing him overreact when it came to Myne and getting so pouty was kind of cute in its simplicity.

“In that case, why don’t you face the future and get back to living as well? There’s a mountain of things we have to do. If you have the time to skip work, you have the time to help. First comes drawing water.”

“‘First’...?”

“And then once that’s done, could you go shopping for me? The market’s up today, but I still can’t go that far with Kamil. Myne would get mad at me for sure.”

Myne hadn’t been able to keep quiet for a minute without telling us not to take Kamil outside until he was old enough to move his head, due to all of the sicknesses outside. Gunther seemed to remember that as well. He fell silent, searching for words.

“Ah, look. Now Kamil’s crying. It’s time for him to be breastfed.” I gave the mopey, frowning Gunther a bucket and shooed him out, then picked up the

crying Kamil and opened the bedroom window. The room lit up in an instant thanks to the dazzlingly bright sunshine of a summer just beginning. A cool breeze blew inside, and that cheered me up even more, like the wind was blowing away the sad, heavy atmosphere that had built up inside.

“Here you are, Kamil.” I had kept him waiting a bit too long, and his small mouth moved desperately as he drank as much and as quickly as he could. That was when Gunther came back, carrying a bucket filled to the brim with water. He frowned harder as he poured it into the jug before going back out to the well.

It took Gunther several trips to the well to finish filling the water jug, after which he picked up the shopping basket and left for the market, all the while mumbling about how Myne definitely did love him.

I finished feeding Kamil, changed his diaper, and then looked around the brightened room as I put him to bed. In the corner, I noticed that dust was starting to pile up. Our bedroom was always ridiculously clean thanks to Myne’s desperate desire to sleep in a clean room, but now that she was gone, it had gotten dirty after just a few days of nobody cleaning it.

“I’ll have to clean while Kamil’s asleep. I want to keep things like they were when Myne was here, as much as possible.”

Once I had finished, I decided to start washing Kamil’s dirty diapers since there were so many. I spread them out to dry on the lines, at which point Gunther came back carrying a lot of stuff. He had bought a bunch of everything so that we wouldn’t have to go shopping again anytime soon.

“I’m back. I’m gonna put all this stuff in the winter prep room, alright?” he said, his bright tone a complete contrast to how miserable he had been on his way out.

“Did something happen out there?”

“On my way there, I bumped into Gil taking the orphans to the forest. I asked about how Myne’s doing. She’s gonna be going to the Noble’s Quarter soon, but she’s doing good and is mainly just worrying about us.”

Gil was one of Myne’s attendants. He was a kid who often walked her home,

and Myne said he was a hard worker who kept the workshop in the orphanage running with Lutz.

“What did you say to him, Gunther? I’m sure you gave him a message for Myne.”

“I told him to tell her that we’re all facing the future and not to worry about us... Hey, what’s with that look? I couldn’t tell Myne I’m off work for a bit since I punched my commander in the mouth,” Gunther said quickly, stumbling over his words and looking generally quite awkward. He wanted to be a dad his kids respected, and especially didn’t want to look uncool in front of Myne.

“That means you need to go back to work so Myne doesn’t worry, now doesn’t it? So when are you going?” I asked with a teasing smile. Gunther’s brow furrowed in a deep, frustrated frown, and said “tomorrow” while avoiding my gaze.

But I could see traces of a smile creeping onto his face. There was life in his voice again, and he was looking up instead of down. That was definitely just him putting on a brave face for now, but I knew he had finally decided to face the future and stride forward, almost certainly because he had finally felt for real that he still had a thin connection to Myne. He knew he could tell her about us by talking to Gil, the kids from the orphanage, and Lutz.

Gunther slept soundly that night, not moving at all even when Kamil started crying. His mood changing so dramatically in a single day was so like him that I couldn’t help but feel a little happy.

“Gunther sure does love Myne, doesn’t he, Kamil? His mood turned around completely just from hearing about Myne through Gil,” I said, patting Kamil on the back after feeding him. He replied with a small burp.



Josef—Beruf Certification

“I heard the foremen are gonna eat with us today,” I said to the leherls, who were packing away their tools since work was over for the day. They all glanced warily at Bierce, then one whispered to me.

“Hey, Josef. That rich patron girl came today, didn’t she? Are things good again? We don’t wanna have a dinner like the last one ever again,” he teased, but I could sense the worry in his voice.

I clenched my fist and gave him a confident grin. “Don’t sweat it. Tonight’s gonna be a good night. For everyone except me, that is—I’ve gotta hold Heidi back.”

There was a moment of silence, then everyone started cackling. *It’s been a long time since the workshop was cheery enough for us to joke around like this*, I thought before a grinning craftsman came over and slapped me on the back.

“Oi, Josef. Looks like you’re gonna have to get to work before dinner.”

“Yep, yep. It’s already your time to shine. Go get Heidi to clean up. She’s still over there thinking to herself,” he said in a now-cheery voice, pointing over to Heidi, who was glaring at some materials while deep in thought.

I turned my back to the craftsmen and quickly walked over to where she was. She didn’t even notice me, and instead just kept mumbling to herself while glaring at a small bowl of materials.

“C’mon, Heidi. Give it a rest for today. We’re all stuck here until you clean everything up,” I said, poking her in the head before grabbing the bowl and lazily handing it over to a nearby lehang. She had been deep in thought, but not deeply enough to stop her from shooting out of her chair the moment the materials were taken from her.

“Gaaah! Josef, wait! Be careful! Don’t mix the materials!”

It looked like I had successfully brought her back to reality. I gave the bowl back to Heidi, which was filled with a powder that had been ground down to

use for ink.

“If you’ve got time to complain, you’ve got time to clean up. The bell’s gonna ring soon.”

“Okay! I’ll clean up right away, so please, be gentle!”

“C’mon, I’m not you. I’ll treat the materials carefully.”

Everyone nearby was laughing and saying things like, “Yeah, leaving Heidi to Josef is always the best move,” but honestly it had been so long since I last heard them teasing us that even their lighthearted mockery was nostalgic. The workshop going back to normal was a huge relief.

“The Gilberta Company’s gonna help get the guildmaster on our side when it comes to selling ink to nobles,” Bierce announced. “We’ve also got a patron who’s helping fund Heidi’s research into colored ink, and we even managed to sell some, so drink as much as you want today, boys.”

This declaration caused the leherls to erupt in cheer, and they started chugging beer and munching enthusiastically through the food on the table. I myself downed my mug of behelle in one go.

We had made and sold the ink that the Gilberta Company wanted so that we could form a connection with them, which led to us being able to leave dealing with nobles to them and the guildmaster. Along the way, we had even found a patron for Heidi’s research. *If we’re not gonna celebrate today, when will we? Our hard work’s finally paid off a little; we can save the rest for tomorrow. Heidi has a long, rough road ahead of her... That is, as long as we don’t tick off our tiny patron.*

I thought back to the tiny girl who had helped us with our colored ink research earlier today. Lady Myne was kind of a weirdo herself, having quickly become friends with Heidi the research nut, but I couldn’t yell at Lady Myne when she did something weird like I could with Heidi. I had to show more restraint and work that out with her attendants. Not to mention, if I didn’t stop Heidi from researching day in and day out, we’d eat up all of Lady Myne’s funding and be in a real bad spot if she refused to give us more.

Even while drinking behelle among all the festivities, my head was still filled

with thoughts of tomorrow's work. Heidi and I had been entrusted with researching the new ink, which meant I would be doing all of the work except the research itself. It was probably obvious by now, but Heidi was utterly useless outside of research; it took her way too long to do anything, and her lack of progress would just end up annoying everyone around her.

"That's some nice chugging there, Josef. You must be happy that the ink we made is selling so well, huh? I bet you wish we could eat with everyone like this every day," Heidi said with a grin, taking a swig of her own behelle. She loved eating with a ton of people like this, especially the other leherls, but in our workshop, Bierce's family and the leherls usually ate separately.

"How many times has Bierce told you that the boys need some time to relax without him being around? Give it up, this is only ever gonna be for special occasions."

"I'm jealous of the leherls. I wanna eat where Dad can't see me sometimes too," she murmured while eyeing Bierce furtively. I laughed and looked his way too. It was true that the leherls wanted to at least relax and eat meals without him, their boss, watching them. His decision to normally eat separately from them was the right one to make.

That said, I had experience with both sides since I had married into Bierce's family through Heidi, and well... It was safe to say that there was a big difference between what the five leherls ate and what we ate. Eating separately was convenient to Bierce in part to save on the leherls' food costs.

There were a lot of reasons and excuses for us eating separately, but regardless of all that, we ate dinner together when there was important news for the workshop. It was the best and worst of times for the leherls, who loved the better quality food but feared Bierce's news.

This time it's good news, but last time it was because Mr. Wolf had died, so yeah...

The last time we had eaten with the leherls was when the former head of the Ink Guild, Wolf, had died under mysterious circumstances, and Bierce ended up unable to refuse the position of guild head. If this meant he had to pick up all the shady, underhanded deals that Wolf had been making, then it wasn't

strange to think that Bierce would have to start dealing with nobles himself.

Naturally, the leherls all paled after hearing that; the workshop would no doubt crumble without Bierce. The lehangs could run away when their three-year contracts ran out, but the leherls didn't have it so easy. Their fates were tied to the workshop. His daughter and successor, Heidi, only cared about research, and since I, her husband, wasn't qualified to be a beruf yet, everyone had been reasonably terrified.

...I gotta get my beruf certification as soon as possible.

One needed the title of "beruf" to be a workshop foreman. Anyone could inherit the workshop when a foreman died, but without this title, the successor's position in the guild would weaken, and he'd have restrictions placed on him. Furthermore, he wouldn't be able to hire any new leherls or lehangs, and lehangs wouldn't be able to renew their contracts with him.

Everything was decided by skill in the world of craftsmen, and it was a harsh world indeed. You couldn't own a workshop without being a beruf, since talentless people owning workshops would damage the reputation and development of the entire area. You could technically get around this restriction if you had friends in powerful places—a personal workshop not belonging to any guild, generally established by a rich merchant or a noble, could be run by a foreman who wasn't a beruf—but that didn't apply to most people, and in general the death of a foreman meant the death of a workshop.

...Like Wolf's own ink workshop.

Since Wolf was the only one in his workshop who was a certified beruf, his workshop rapidly deteriorated after he died. Limits were put on trade, and due to rumors coming out about his dark past, several lehangs canceled their contracts once spring came.

I can't let our workshop meet the same fate.

I was a leherl married to the workshop's successor—I was tied to it no matter what happened, and I didn't have the luxury of slacking on getting my beruf certification, lazily watching Heidi go nuts over research. Bierce had been forced to become head of the Ink Guild after Wolf died, and in all honesty, it wouldn't surprise me if he dropped dead under equally mysterious circumstances any

day now.

I need to get my beruf certification as soon as possible.

Bierce had slapped me on the back and said, “Josef, I’m counting on you,” when he became the head of the Ink Guild, and I felt the true weight of that slap more than ever now.

“...Woah!” My heavy thoughts were suddenly interrupted by Heidi jabbing a finger between my eyebrows.

“Drop the frown already and eat up, okay?”

“What’s with you all of a sudden...?”

“I need your help for sure to develop the new ink. I won’t be able to make so many different kinds myself, so shape up. There’s gonna be a lot of stuff I want to try tomorrow,” Heidi said as she piled meat onto my plate. It took strength and stamina to mix oil and materials together for hours at a time while making this new ink, which meant Heidi would have a real hard time doing it by herself.

Am I just an ink-making machine to you, Heidi? Huh? I thought, but despite feeling a little frustrated at my wife for once again thinking about nothing but research, I ate the meat on my plate and drank my behelle.

“Isn’t this great, Dad? I’m so glad that little girl decided to be my patron. Everything’s going so well now thanks to that.”

Although our workshop was in a better spot than before, Bierce remained the head of the Ink Guild, and the deals with nobles made in the past were all resting on the guildmaster’s ultimate decision. The fact that Bierce was the only one in the workshop with a beruf certification was still unchanged as well.

The only things that’re going well are the new ink selling and you getting research funds. Is that all that matters to you?! Come on! I silently yelled at Heidi, who was beaming thoughtlessly as she finished her dinner.

Ever since then, Lady Myne, our patron, visited the workshop seemingly every day to help with our research on colored ink. The colors changed dramatically based on the oil and materials used, and faded over time once put on paper.

Overall, the research was leading into a string of failures. But we kept making different kinds of colored ink despite all the problems, with Lady Myne writing it all down.

“What to do, what to do...?” Heidi murmured, getting so absorbed in her research that she would forget to sleep and eat. She kept repeating that she needed to make ink good enough for Lady Myne like it was a magic spell as she changed the kinds of inks and searched the market for materials that looked like they would make good colors. None of that was especially new, so despite my exasperation, I wasn’t really worried about her; all I had to do was wait for the right opportunities to stuff food into her mouth and watch for when she started wavering in her seat so that I could throw her into bed.

Sadly, that wasn’t enough this time. Heidi had been murmuring something about there having to be a secret to all this while chewing on her morning bread, but I just ignored her and went ahead to the workshop. Eventually, a terrified lehang came rushing up to me.

“Mr. Josef, Mrs. Heidi’s been arrested or something!”

“What?!”

She hadn’t shown up at the workshop yet, but I’d assumed that she was so late because she had fallen asleep during breakfast—in reality, she had been captured by art workshop employees after she started fishing around inside while they were drawing. *What the hell is she thinking?!* I thought as I raced down the street with the lehang.

It wasn’t long before I found Heidi surrounded by angry-looking craftsmen.

“Heidi, what are you doing here?!”

“I was chewing on my bread, trying to think of good ideas, and suddenly... here I am. Why am I here?” Heidi tilted her head at me while blinking sleepily.

I immediately shook her awake. “How am I supposed to know that?! Wake up already!” I yelled, then deeply apologized to all of the hard-eyed art craftsmen watching us. “I’m sorry my sleep-deprived wife caused you trouble.”

Whether she had consciously come here or not, her goal had definitely been to find out the secret behind making ink not change colors when put on paper.

But it was a major crime to steal trade secrets like that. I had to convince them that Heidi had just wandered over here sleepily, with no hidden intentions whatsoever.

“Quit messing around and tell the truth! She wouldn’t just sleepwalk over to a place like this!”

“If she weren’t sleepwalking, she wouldn’t be here at all. We have no business here.”

“Obviously she was here to steal the secrets to our paint production methods!”

“I’m a leherl working in an ink workshop and she’s its successor. We don’t need to know about paint; it has nothing to do with ink. And we both know how serious the punishments are for stealing trade secrets. We would never do that.”

While I was busy getting yelled at by a bunch of furious craftsmen, Heidi had started to fall asleep on my arm. Despite her own husband desperately apologizing for her own blunders, her head started to bob. By the time she was audibly snoring, the craftsmen had all calmed down and were just shaking their heads and expressing their sympathy for what a crazy wife I had ended up with.

“Just keep a better eye on her, alright?”

“Absolutely. It’ll never happen again.”

Heidi didn’t wake up no matter how much I shook her, so I ended up carrying her to the workshop, at which point fourth bell rang. Noon had come, with us making no progress despite the fact that Lady Myne always came in the afternoon.

...Can I actually survive as this woman’s husband? I was so annoyed by Heidi’s bizarre behavior that thoughts of divorce briefly flashed through my mind as I tossed her into bed.

“Don’t drag us back down now that things are finally looking up. Their method for stopping paint from changing colors is a business secret. You know what we would do to anyone who tried stealing our ink production processes, right?”

“Ngh... Sorry,” she replied, scooting up in bed. It seemed that she now understood how bad the situation had been as well.

“You really weren’t thinking, were you?”

“I’ve been thinking so hard lately that it feels like my head is gonna burst.”

“I’m not talking about research here, alright?” I poked Heidi’s puffed-out cheek, and she blinked her gray eyes several times in surprise.

“Huh? What else but research should I be thinking about right now? I need to solve this fast, while she’s still funding us.” Heidi looked at me as if she couldn’t believe that I didn’t understand that, and honestly I didn’t feel like arguing. I had heard that Bierce and the Gilberta Company had come to an agreement about the research funding; it wasn’t anything for Heidi to worry about. Really, what I needed to think about here was how to keep the patron from being weirded out by Heidi and leaving.

“Heidi, Josef—I’ve figured out how to make fixing agents!” Lady Myne exclaimed, walking into the workshop with a beaming smile that afternoon. She and Heidi squealed with excitement and immediately started talking about how to make the fixing agent used for dyeing cloth.

“Woooah! This is amazing! So amazing!”

Thanks to the fixing agent Lady Myne told us about and taught us to make, we stopped the colored ink from fading when used. It was done.

...And the burden was finally off of my shoulders.

Lady Myne didn’t need to visit our workshop anymore now that the ink was done, and Heidi could spend less time immersed in research. To be honest, having a patron visit our workshop basically every day was exhausting. I had to keep my eyes on Heidi at all times to make sure she didn’t do anything rude, and Lady Myne’s presence made it hard for all the other workers to go about doing their jobs as they normally would.

I sighed in relief, but Heidi slumped over in disappointment. “Aah, we sure finished that in no time...”

“Now that the ink’s done, she’s not gonna be paying for the research anymore. Playtime’s over,” I said, poking her cheek. *Please, don’t let her or anyone else cause any more problems*, I begged on the inside.

It was a simple wish, but not one the gods were willing to grant: Lady Myne smiled and said, “I don’t mind paying a bit more if you want to continue your research.”

“Lady Myne, you’re the best!”

“Please, you’re spoiling her!” I yelled. *Who’s gonna keep an eye on her while she does her research?! I don’t wanna live like this for the rest of my life!*

“Heidi, Josef—as far as I am concerned, you are both now Gutenbergs,” Lady Myne said with a smile while pointing at Heidi, who was spinning in place with her arms spread out like an idiot.

“Guten... huh? We’re a what?”

“Gutenberg. The name of a heroic—nay, godlike—being whose legendary accomplishments changed the history of books. As it stands, Johann is the Gutenberg of metal letter types, Benno is the Gutenberg of plant paper, and Lutz is the Gutenberg of selling books. There’s also Ingo who helped make the printing press, and now you two are the Gutenbergs of making ink. It is only natural that I would fund the Gutenbergs who are making my dreams of reading a reality.”

It looked like I was the only one who wasn’t following her. The little boy accompanying Lady Myne had murmured something about there being “another one,” and Heidi was jumping for joy.

“We’re Gutenbergs, Josef! She has work for us! She’ll fund us! She’ll let me do research! Yahooooo!”

“I’m sure that knowing why the ink changes color will prove useful in the future, so please, keep up the good work.”

“You can count on us!” Heidi declared proudly.

...Ah, of course. I get it. I’ve been trying not to think about it since she’s our patron, but this little girl is a weirdo just like Heidi!

That said, while them getting along so well wasn't good for my heart, Lady Myne already had her own personal workshop and the backing of the Gilberta Company despite her young age; she was on another level from Heidi and her singular obsession with research.

"However, your highest priority should be making the ink. If you don't finish an order before the due date, I'll cut off your funding without a second thought."

"Eek!"

"You're the kind of person who loses sight of their surroundings when they get absorbed in their research. I need to make it clear what your priorities should be, and lay out a punishment for when you fail to stay on track," she said to Heidi, looking confident and authoritative.

...Yep, that's a businesswoman for you. She looks young, but she's got a proper backbone.

"Birds of a feather sure know how to clip each other's wings, huh? Looks like you know exactly how to keep her under control," the apprentice from the Gilberta Company chuckled, saying exactly what I was thinking.

Right, birds of a feather! I nearly burst out laughing myself, but Lady Myne glared at me with a pout, so I hurriedly promised to watch over Heidi's research to get her back in a good mood.

And rest assured, Heidi was in a good mood that night.

"Isn't it all grand, Josef? She's going to continue being my patron, and everything's just going so well."

"Heidi, seriously...?" I couldn't believe she was acting like all the problems she had caused this morning just didn't exist. But before I could say anything, Heidi beamed a smile as dazzling as the summer sun.

"Now you're definitely gonna get your beruf certification."

"Huh?"

"That's what our workshop needs now more than ever, right? We finished the new colored ink and secured research funding from a patron, so if we force the

issue with the Ink Guild—which owes us for dumping the position of guild head onto Dad—it should be pretty easy for us to get you a beruf certification. Don't you think so?"

My jaw dropped to the floor. I probably looked pretty stupid right now, but could you blame me? I never would have expected to hear Heidi talking about the future of the workshop or anything like that. I wanted a beruf certification as soon as possible, but I hadn't at all considered that this was why Heidi was so absorbed in her ink research.

"...But you're the one who's researching the colored ink, Heidi. You deserve the certification."

For each success, only one person could receive certification. Heidi deserved it; she was the one who had been so dedicated to her research that she was forgetting to eat and sleep. But when I said that, she opened her gray eyes wide and tilted her head.

"I couldn't have finished the ink this quickly without you, and you'll need the certification to run the workshop. Is this even something to discuss?"

"You're not wrong, but..."

"I don't wanna think about all this hard business stuff. I just want to mix a bunch of stuff and learn a lot about ink. Take the beruf certification for my sake, Josef. It's what your cute wife wants," Heidi said with a grin. For some reason, confirming that she was cute felt like accepting defeat, so I silently tossed her into bed.

Some time later in the future, Bierce, as the head of the Ink Guild, awarded me my beruf certification.

Leon—Sylvester Undercover

“Leon, we’ve gotta go to the forest today,” Lutz said before racing back to his room so he could change. I went back to my own room to do the same. The two of us always went to the temple once the store was open and we had finished dealing with the initial surge of customers.

“To think that the Gilberta Company’s leherl work would include going to the forest with orphans...” I grumbled, pulling on the rags I usually wore to stop myself from sticking out when passing through the south gate.

I came from a family of linen merchants. After my baptism, I became an apprentice at the Gilberta Company, then signed on as a leherl at the age of ten. The entire process was planned from the start by my parents, who wanted to strengthen their bonds with the Gilberta Company and its clothing business. In other words, I was working at the Gilberta Company to help boost my family store.

Incidentally, due to that Myne girl bringing in weird work all the time, the Gilberta Company had ended up venturing outside its usual area of business to build a high-class eatery. Master Benno had told me to go to the temple to learn how to serve food from the attendants who served nobles there, which was the only reason I was going. That said, I was grateful that I was being trained by attendants who had experience serving nobles, since I did think it would be pretty useful for moving forward in life.

...But for some reason, I spent more time working in the workshop than training to be a waiter, and even now I was being made to take orphans to the forest. It didn’t make any sense.

Unlike Lutz, who was born poor, I had barely gone to the forest before this. I wouldn’t have minded going there, either, if doing so would help my family. But chopping up wood, making paper, and printing books had nothing to do with our family business—in fact, it really wasn’t merchant work at all. Making things was the job of craftsmen, while merchants were in the business of selling those

things, so I really had no idea why I was being told to make products myself.

I found it easier to accept going to the temple and helping Myne when there was something in it for me. She was an apprentice blue shrine maiden in the temple, and the master of Fran, who was teaching me to serve food. Master Benno had told me to treat Myne like the daughter of a noble, but she was actually from the poor part of the city like Lutz. I knew that for sure as I had seen her going in and out of the Gilberta Company in her normal raggedy clothes.

I hadn't been told why or how a once-impooverished girl had become an apprentice blue shrine maiden. What I did know, though, was that Master Benno had been pulling strings to maintain her new outward appearance.

Myne had outfits suitable for wearing in the temple, but they were all used—none of them had been made to order. Her ceremonial robes were a bit different, but since those were made using cloth that Master Benno had given to the temple, she still hadn't paid for them, and she probably wouldn't buy any more in the future. Myne was a fake rich girl who would never be of any use to my family at all.

Of course, I did think her inventions like the plant paper and hairpins made using thread were impressive, and they were definitely profitable for the Gilberta Company; had I never gone to the temple, I would have viewed her from afar as a very impressive child prodigy. But she wasn't of any use to me, and it was annoying to watch her get so clingy with Lutz all the time, so I didn't really want to spend more time around her than I had to.

Lutz was this weird guy who wanted to be a merchant even though he was the son of a carpenter. He had none of the common sense that any merchant should have. The way I saw it, he had only been able to become a leherl because of his friendship with Myne—that was the only way I could explain a failure of a merchant like him getting a leherl contract before turning ten.

To be fair, he was a hard worker, just like Mark said he was. He had learned to read, write, and do math pretty quickly, and I knew he was doing his best to learn all sorts of work. But he was struggling to keep it all together, and it was hard to imagine he was really understanding it all on a deep level.

...’Cause, I mean, isn’t it strange? He’s always like, “I’ll make what Myne thinks up,” but apprentice merchants aren’t supposed to be making things. They’re supposed to be selling things, or spreading them around. Since Lutz loves to work in the workshop and take the kids to the forest, he’s a lot more like a craftsman than he is a merchant. But well, at least he’s managing to do the workshop ledgers properly.

“Morning, Lutz. Good morning, Leon,” Myne said.

There were a lot of people in front of the workshop, dressed and ready to go to the forest, and standing in front of them all was a tiny figure in blue robes. It was rare for Sister Myne to visit the workshop without any warning, and if I remembered correctly, this was normally around the time she would be being taught how to play the harspiel.

“Good morning, Sister Myne,” I replied, before quickly noticing that there was an imposing figure with an immense sense of presence among the orphans wearing tattered clothes. It was the blue priest Sylvester from yesterday, wearing the raggedy clothing that only poor people wore. His feet were planted firmly on the ground, and his arms were crossed.

...What the absolute heck is going on?!

I nearly let out a shriek upon seeing Lord Sylvester, the expensive bow on his back completely contrasting with his cheap clothing. I managed to hold it in by clamping a hand over my mouth, but my mind had gone blank.

“Lutz, I’m really sorry about this, but I have to ask you to guide Sylvester to the forest. Leon, Gil, I ask that you both keep an eye on the children while they’re gathering. Will everything be fine?”

What the heck, Myne?! You really expect us to just go and take the archduke to the lower city’s forest?!

Lord Sylvester was in fact Aub Ehrenfest. I had been able to figure that out because, after meeting him during his tour of the workshop, Master Benno had stayed up late into the night talking to Mark. Lord Sylvester apparently wanted Master Benno to massively expand the scope of the printing industry, and I had been asked my thoughts on that as a leherl.

...Is she for real? Is she really expecting us to take him to the lower city's forest?!

Gil was enthusiastically nodding, and Lutz seemed pretty nonchalant about the whole situation. It made no sense. Had I been able to, I would have screamed that they didn't know who they were dealing with here.

...Or wait, do they actually not know who they're dealing with here?! Do they not realize Lord Sylvester is the archduke?!

On second thought, Master Benno had been dragged out of the workshop the second it was clear he recognized Lord Sylvester, and since Lutz went back to his home at night, he hadn't been there for Master Benno and Mark's late-night discussion. Neither Myne, Lutz, nor any of the orphans here knew that Lord Sylvester was the archduke. Only I did.

I wasn't sure whether or not I should reveal the truth. I opened my mouth to speak but then quickly closed it again, instead deciding to leave it all to Lutz and walking away. Dealing with the orphans would be a lot safer than dealing with the archduke disguised as a blue priest—messing up a little with them wouldn't risk dramatically changing my whole future.

The second Sylvester passed through the temple gates, he grimaced and looked around. "So this is the lower city where commoners live, huh? Sure smells like crap down here. Looks like it, too. Aren't there any servants here to keep this place clean? I don't know how anyone can stand living here."

Lutz, who had stepped ahead a bit to guide Lord Sylvester, turned his head back slightly and asked him who would hire servants to clean the city. It was a fair question since someone would have to pay these servants to keep the lower city clean, and as far as I knew, there was nobody eccentric enough to spend their own coin on such an endeavor.

"Who would... hire them?" Lord Sylvester asked.

"Yeah. The city doesn't belong to anyone, so..."

"You fool! Don't you know that the city belongs to the archduke?!" I instinctively protested after hearing Lutz's casual reply. Telling the archduke to his face that nobody owned his city was like asking to be killed—or worse.

“Oh, right. In that case, Brother Sylvester, please ask the archduke to hire servants to clean the lower city. A lowly commoner like me could never be so brazen as to ask the archduke himself. But blue priests are nobles, right? I’m sure you can do it,” Lutz said with a smile. Honestly, I wanted to punch him in the back of the head.

Lutz! You’re being more brazen right now than anyone I’ve ever seen! But thankfully, in what could only be described as a miracle, Lord Sylvester didn’t get mad at all. We just kept walking down the lower city road.

“Whew. There are so many colors here that my eyes are starting to tire out,” Lord Sylvester said.

“That’s understandable, since the temple is pure white. The orphans reacted the same way when they walked through the lower city for the first time. Hey, Gil—or Fritz, even—could you tell Sylvester about how to walk in the lower city?” Lutz asked. “I don’t really know how the temple works, so I’m not all that familiar with what’s different here.”

It was a wise move leaving that to the orphans. Both Lutz and I were raised in the lower city, so we didn’t know what would surprise Lord Sylvester, or what he would need to be careful about.

“I’m pretty sure you’re Myne’s attendant, right? Perfect. Teach me.”

Gil wore a tense expression as he explained as best he could, and all the while Fritz corrected his sloppy polite language from the side. The adult gray priests in the group started to crowd around Lord Sylvester, probably thinking they couldn’t trust him to Gil, who couldn’t even speak properly yet.

The second I saw Lutz was free, I grabbed him by his collar and pulled him over to me. “Hey, Lutz. What’re you gonna give Brother Sylvester to eat in the forest?” I whispered, and Lutz looked back at me like he hadn’t really given it any thought.

“What’s wrong with him eating the same stuff we have? He wants to see what the lower city’s forest is like, so...”

“Everything’s wrong with it!” *You can’t make the archduke eat potatoffels and salty soup!*

When gathering and making paper in the forest, we would use the boiling water to steam potatoffels and then have them with butter for lunch. That, and soup made from throwing some nearby vegetation into a pot of salted water, potentially with some dried meat if anyone had brought some. Plus, that soup was made in the same pots we used to boil bark; we couldn't give that to the archduke.

"I'm gonna go report this to Master Benno. You go on ahead." I pointed at the Gilberta Company, which had just come into view, and separated from the orphan group to rush over to Mark, who had just walked a customer outside. He turned toward me, and his smile deepened when we made eye contact.

"Leon. Shall we discuss this upstairs?" It seemed that Mark had somehow managed to guess the true identity of the man wearing a silver hair clasp, leather shoes, and a fancy bow, all of which starkly contrasted with his raggedy clothing and made him stick out more than he would have in normal clothes. I hurriedly climbed up the outside stairs.

I started to explain as soon as I was on the second floor, reporting as briefly as possible that Lord Sylvester was sneaking out to go hunting with the orphans, that he was being guided by Lutz, and that he was about to be served the lunch of an impoverished commoner.

"I shall have Matilda prepare bread, ham, cheese, and drink. It might be wise to bring cutlery as well; Master Benno said that they eat the potatoffels with their bare hands outside."

Apparently Master Benno had gone with Lutz and Myne to the forest once before, and at the time had been forced to eat the potatoffels off of a board with his bare hands. Now that they were making soup at the orphans' request, they brought wooden bowls and spoons with them in pouches on their hips, but Lord Sylvester had joined so suddenly that there probably wasn't any spare for him. It was hard to imagine that a noble who was going hunting and used to servants preparing everything for him would think to bring his own cutlery. It was better to play it safe and prepare some of our own.

"Leon, I will trust serving Lord Sylvester to you. Please make the most of your training from Fran. Ah, and I see the food is ready." Mark handed me a lunch

basket that had been prepared by the servant Matilda, wearing his usual smile as he did so. “It seems that Lord Sylvester has no intention of informing Myne or Lutz who he really is. Take good care not to slip up and reveal his secret.”

I took the prepared lunch and rushed to the forest. Work had already begun at the usual riverbank, and I could see bark boiling inside the pots. Some kids were washing potatoffels in the river, while others were gathering in the forest, just like normal. The only note of concern was that Lutz and Sylvester were nowhere to be seen.

“Where are Lutz and Brother Sylvester?”

“We split up once we got here,” Fritz responded. “They went off to the hunting grounds, and Lutz said they’d come back when fourth bell rang.” I noticed he was stacking stones rather than watching over the pots like he usually did, and when I asked what he was doing, he said he was making a table for Lord Sylvester to eat on.

“I think Brother Sylvester will need it because he’s a blue priest. It took even us gray priests a while to get used to eating without a table.”

It seemed that I wasn’t the only one cradling my head over the fact that Lutz wasn’t treating Lord Sylvester like a noble at all. The moment I realized that, I felt an odd sense of companionship with this guy.

“That’s a good idea. I went and got some food for him to eat. No way could we make Brother Sylvester eat a lunch of nothing but potatoffels and soup, right?” I held up the basket in my hand, and Fritz blinked in surprise.

“The blue priests are the ones who prepare the food offered as divine gifts in the temple, so I didn’t consider for a second that we would need to prepare something for him to eat.” Fritz had apparently considered himself a part of Lord Sylvester’s group today, and had even expected some extra fancy food to be handed down to him.

...How were you expecting his food to be prepared when there are no chefs here? The wall of common sense separating me from the gray priests was just too enormous.

Fourth bell rang and I started preparing Lord Sylvester’s lunch. He and Lutz

came walking back, having bagged two birds.

“Brother Sylvester, you can hang them from this branch.”

“How should I do that?” Lord Sylvester asked, looking at the branch Lutz had pointed out in confusion. But Lutz made no move to take the birds from Sylvester. Instead, he just explained what to do.

“You really think I have a random cord on me, Lutz? Well, I don’t.”

“Why didn’t you bring any cord to the forest with you? You can’t bleed them without it. Just what do you have in that pouch of yours, anyway?” Lutz asked, untying the cord wrapped around his own waist.

I immediately ran over to where Lutz was and demanded to know why he wasn’t taking care of the birds himself. I couldn’t believe it; not only was he making Lord Sylvester hold the birds, but he was expecting him to handle the preparations as well.

“I mean, he’s the one who hunted them, so he has to take care of them. Making someone else prepare the meat you’ve caught is the same as giving it away.”

“That’s how things are in the lower city, not the temple! Brother Sylvester is —”

“Brother Sylvester is here to hunt in the lower city. So what’s wrong with him following lower-city rules?” Lutz asked, speaking as though what he was saying was obvious.

“Well, Myne did tell me that I’d have to stick to the nobles’ forest if I wanted to hunt like a noble. Don’t sweat it. I can do this,” Lord Sylvester said with a grin as he began tying his birds to the branch.

“Brother Sylvester, keep an eye on them. Beasts might be attracted by the smell and try to steal them.”

“Right. And by the way, Lutz, how do you wash your hands without attendants? I’m pretty sure commoners can’t even use cleansing magic,” Lord Sylvester said, looking down at his bloodstained hands. It was probably normal for attendants to bring him bowls of water.

“There’s a river right next to us, isn’t there? You can wash your hands in there. Ask the other kids how; I need to go look for some grass to use as more cords. I imagine you’ll want to go hunting in the afternoon too, after all.”

Lord Sylvester puffed out his chest and said that of course he would, then turned around to look at everyone else. “...Alright, kids! Teach me how to wash my hands in that river.”

“I can teach you, Brother Syl. Follow me. I learned from Lutz. I was real surprised when he washed his hands without even drawing water in a bucket first.” The kids raced to the riverbed and Lord Sylvester, looking amused, dashed after them.

I went ahead and grabbed Lutz’s arm before he could leave to go hunt for grass. “Hey, Lutz. What’s that ‘Syl’ nickname all about? Isn’t that going a little too far?”

“It should be fine. I mean, he’s the one who suggested it in the first place,” Lutz said with a shrug before explaining how the name “Brother Syl” came into existence. “‘Brother Sylvester’ is too hard for the really little ones to say, and each time they messed it up, the gray priests would all go white as sheets and have everyone kneel while begging for their rudeness to be forgiven.”

“Huh.”

“The third time this happened, a cart on the road almost hit one of the little ones kneeling at the back.” Apparently Lutz had saved the kid from getting hit, and since Brother Sylvester was getting tired of the gray priests holding everything up to apologize, he told the children to just start calling him “Brother Syl.”

“He’s pretty kind and relaxed for a blue priest, don’t you think? He’s kind of a weird guy, but I’m glad he’s not one of the violent, arrogant nobles I’ve heard about,” Lutz said, before turning around and heading off to the forest to search for grass.

I served Lord Sylvester his food, and lunch came to a safe end. One person had a separate menu, and there was a table for them consisting solely of a board placed atop some stones, but Lutz didn’t say anything about it, and Lord Sylvester seemed to accept it without a word.

“By the way, what do you all think about that Myne girl?” Lord Sylvester asked Lutz. “You know her pretty well, don’t you?”

“Well... She knows all sorts of weird things, but she has almost no common sense. She’s so weak that she’s almost always on the verge of death, and she can’t do anything without help. But she’s nice, and she supports my dreams. Myne’s the best friend I ever could have asked for, and I wouldn’t be here today without her.” Lutz was speaking in a polite, reserved tone, but it was clear he was speaking from the heart.

Lord Sylvester tilted his head back, peering at the sky in thought. “What I’ve heard about her is a little different. They say she improved the orphanage, but how much of that is true? She and Ferdinand are saying things are way better now, but if that’s true, she really should brag to the archduke about it to get a reward. If she’s lying, though, he might end up giving her a big punishment instead.”

The orphans were urged to tell the truth, and so they all started talking about what the orphanage had been like before Myne came. They spoke about how she had saved them: how much more food they got to eat now, how they could make soup on their own, and that they were able to spend all winter around a warm fire instead of running out of wood partway through. Their eyes were all shining, and anyone could tell how deep their respect and gratitude for Myne really was.

...So she helped out the orphanage, huh? I had only started visiting the temple after the orphanage, the director’s chambers, and the workshop had all been set up, so I hadn’t known how miserable the orphanage used to be. *And wow, I didn’t know you guys were able to talk this much.*

What surprised me most of all was how talkative the gray priests were being as they recounted how far the orphanage had come. The younger kids would always talk pretty casually once outside of the temple, but the old gray priests generally kept silent while working in the forest or the workshop, speaking only when absolutely necessary. One could say that answering a blue priest’s question was enough to be considered “absolutely necessary” to them, but still, they were talking way more than usual.

...And is it just me, or are they saying nothing but praise? Talk about her flaws, too! Like how she's always clinging to Lutz, ignoring what people say, and giving people trouble with her weird ideas! There are loads! That was what I yelled on the inside, but when Lord Sylvester asked for my opinion, I had no choice but to evade the question by giving the generic say-nothing answer of "I have not spent much time with Sister Myne and so do not know her very well." I wasn't sure what Master Benno would want me to say, and I knew for sure that listing off my problems with her would just make it awkward as heck for me in the workshop.

"...I see. According to you guys, she's practically a saint," Lord Sylvester murmured, taking a necklace with a black stone out of the pouch on his hip. He looked at it carefully, falling into deep thought for a moment.

"Brother Sylvester, animals are going for your meat!" Lutz shouted.

"What?!" Lord Sylvester stuffed the necklace back into his pouch, drawing his bow and firing three arrows at the beasts. Each one hit its mark, and he immediately started running to the birds. The back of his right hand shone as he dashed across the forest floor, and all of a sudden, he was holding a sword. "That's my prey!"

The sword flashed, and that alone was enough to scare away the beasts. I personally felt sheer terror at the sight of a noble's weapon—one a commoner could never wield—but the kids all cheered in excitement.

"You're amazing, Brother Syl! You're so strong!"

"I know, right?"

Sylvester, perhaps enthused by the children's praise, kept on hunting in the afternoon. He shot birds high out of the sky while all the kids were watching, earning him more cheers and applause.

"We should be heading back soon. If we don't get back before the chefs leave, we won't be able to prepare the meat. I didn't expect you to catch this much," Lutz said worriedly while looking at all of the game. It was common sense in the lower city to only hunt as much as you needed; bringing home more than you could eat would just lead to it rotting on your shelves.

“Brother Sylvester’s a blue priest, remember? He provides the orphanage with its divine gifts anyway; he can just give the meat to the orphans.” By indirectly suggesting that they would get to eat the meat themselves, I was easily able to convince the gray priests to help carry it all back. Brother Sylvester gladly left them to it.

“Alright! Back to the temple we go!” he declared, in a visibly good mood.

“Right!”

We started preparing the meat as soon as we got back. Among the busily moving crowd, I noticed Lord Sylvester give Myne the necklace with the black stone.

Afterword

Hello again. It's me, Miya Kazuki. Thank you very much for reading *Ascendance of a Bookworm: Part 2 Volume 4*. This concludes Part 2.

In this volume, Heidi and Josef from the ink workshop were added to the Gutenbergs, a group of people involved in printing. Heidi had dedicated her whole life to researching ink, and Josef was instructed to look after her way back when she was an apprentice. She took a liking to him, and before he knew it, they were married and he was going to be looking after her for the rest of their lives. I wrote them imagining what Lutz and Myne could have been like if Myne didn't have the Devouring and could have kept making paper with Lutz instead of going to the temple.

In any case, in an attempt to accelerate the creation of toys and picture books for her little brother Kamil, Myne delved into the realm of colored ink. There were many failures along the way, but in the end she was able to make colored ink for printing, successfully adding color to her picture books. She was making yet more progress in her quest for books.

In the midst of all that, the abandoned Devouring child Dirk, the Ahrensbach noble Count Bindewald, and the black feystone charm Sylvester gave to Myne all led to a dramatic change in her life and surroundings.

The journey of Rozemyne, who became a noble to protect her family, continues in Part 3: Adopted Daughter of an Archduke. Please look forward to it.

Myne's serious, dignified expression in the cover art makes her look very much like an adult. I think it's the perfect illustration for the conclusion of Part 2. You Shiina-sama, thank you.

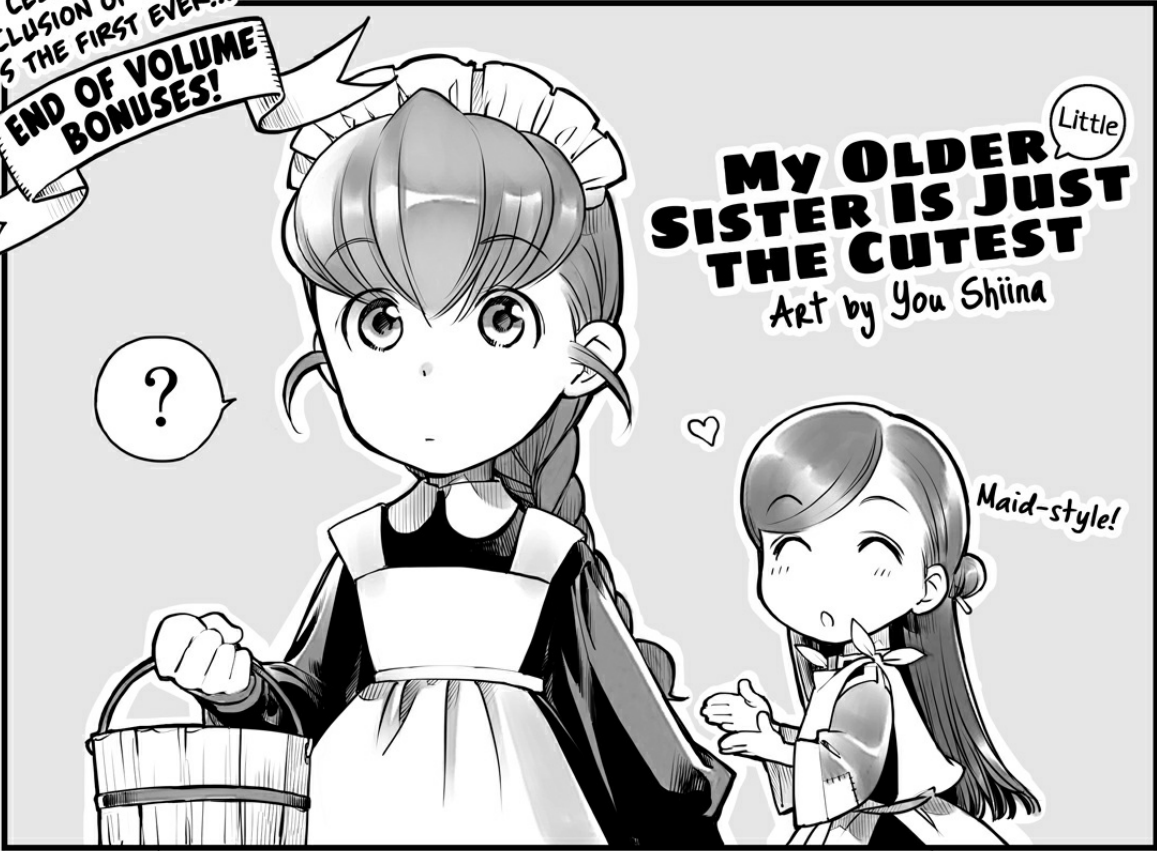
And finally, I offer up my highest thanks to everyone who read this book. The first volume of Part 3 is planned to release soon. May we meet again there!

May 2016, Miya Kazuki

COMING OUT OF NOWHERE
TO CELEBRATE THE
CONCLUSION OF PART 2,
IT'S THE FIRST EVER...

END OF VOLUME
BONUSES!

**MY OLDER
SISTER IS JUST
THE CUTEST**
Art by You Shiina



EVEN
THOUGH
HE'S THIS
SMALL, HE
HAS NAILS,
AND HE
SQUEEZES
MY FINGERS
SO TIGHT!

AWWW!
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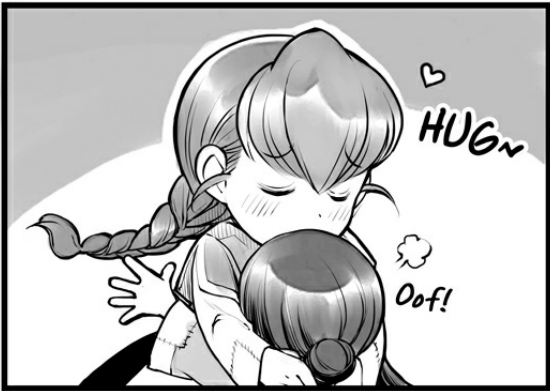
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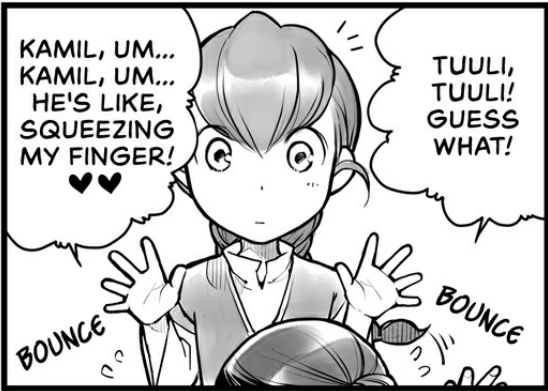
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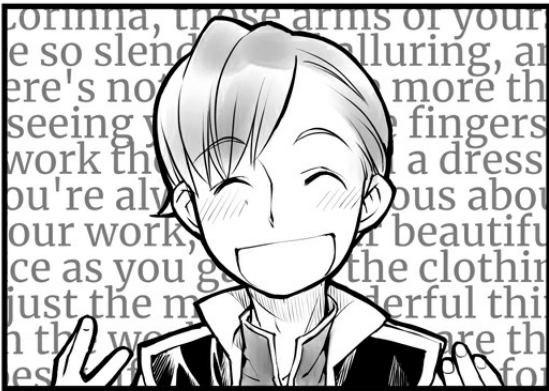
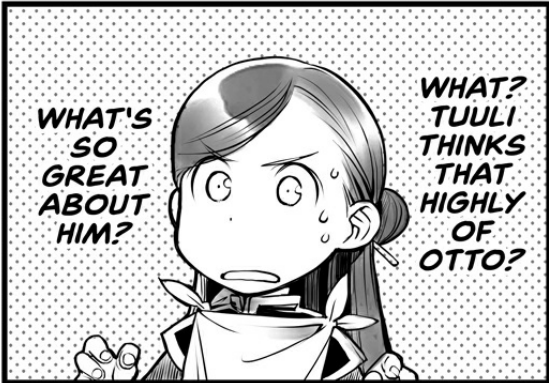
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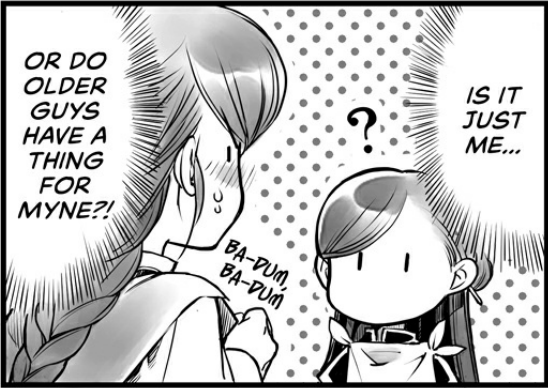
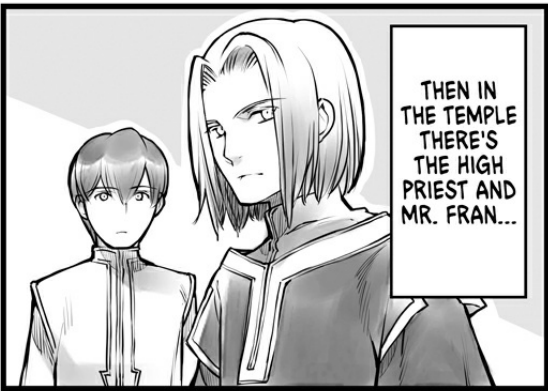
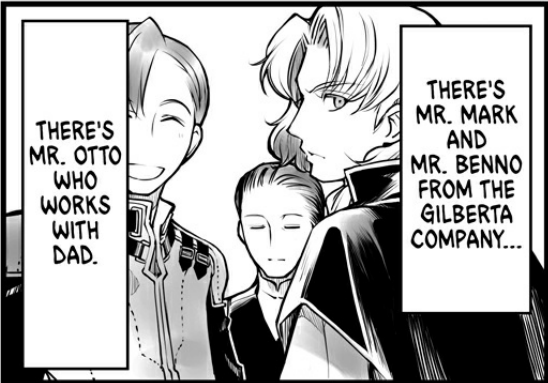
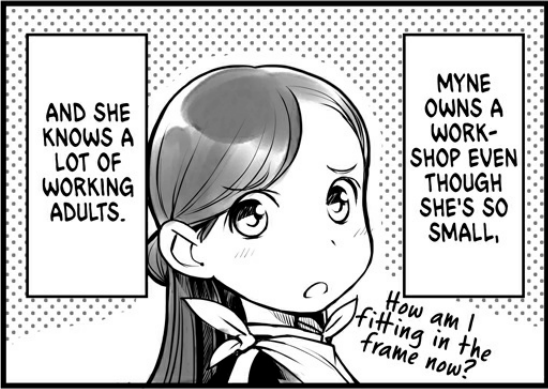
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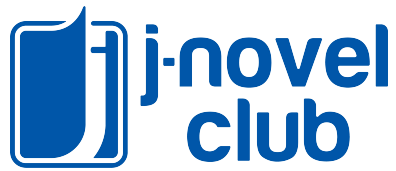
A huge fan of Corinna

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Ascendance of a Bookworm: Part 2 Apprentice Shrine Maiden Volume 4

by Miya Kazuki

Translated by Quof Edited by Kieran Redgewell

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